

NOVEL

09

WRITTEN BY
Yomu
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ILLUSTRATED BY
Monda

**TRAPPED IN A
DATING SIM**
THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES
IS TOUGH FOR MOBS



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Brave

**FINN LETA
HERING**

**OSCAR FIA
HOGAN**

**JAKE RAPHA
HOLFORT**

**MILIARIS LUCHS
ERZBERGER**

**JENNA FOU
BARTFORT**

**FINLEY FOU
BARTFORT**



"Shouldn't it normally be the other way around? I would've guessed you'd ask Leon to help your family out, not warn him away."

 **NOELLE**

 **ANGELICA**

"I am Leon's future wife. However other people may think of me, my foremost priority is the prosperity of our family."

"You're saying that Mr. Leon is your first priority, right?"

 **LEON**

 **OLIVIA**



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YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY

MONDA



Seven Seas Entertainment

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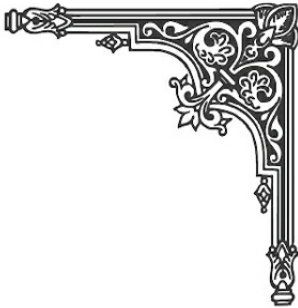
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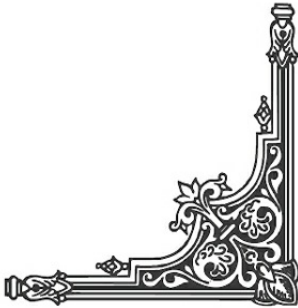
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THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS.



Prologue

ONE OF THE male love interests was turned into a girl. I discovered this the day before our new term started, right as I'd barely settled into my room in the boys' dormitory. I should clarify that this character was a love interest from the *third* installment of the game, and his transition to womanhood took place before the game's scenario had even begun. I logically grasped what was happening, but it was a real struggle for my brain to digest it.

I, Leon Fou Bartfort, was still only a student at the academy, but in a classic example of cruel and unusual punishment I had somehow been promoted through the ranks and given the title of marquess. That was entirely the fault of the rotten scuzzball known as King Roland, and it was only the latest in his list of crimes. As much as he deserved all the blame, I had no time to waste thinking about him at the moment. The more pressing matter was...well, let me reiterate: *One of the love interests had turned into a girl.*

Two culprits were responsible for this particular incident: Marie Fou Lafan, who had been my sister in my former life, and Cleare, the AI possessing a small, softball-sized robot body.

My fiancées had practically forced me to return to my parents' home for some rest and relaxation during spring break, so I entrusted Marie and Cleare to conduct an investigation of the academy on my behalf. They were supposed to be collecting whatever intel they could on the characters who appeared in the third installment of the otome game we were living in. Instead, under the pretense of conducting experiments, Cleare went and turned a male student named Aaron into a female one.

Cruelty didn't even begin to describe what Cleare had done. She had essentially used "the descendants of new humans"—her terminology—as personal test subjects. She and Luxion were machines created by the old - humans; they loathed the new humans and their ability to manipulate magic from the bottoms of their hearts. Wait, did AIs have hearts? Anyway, that philosophical debate aside, they hated any humans who could use magic... including me.

Luxion was another AI. He was also my partner. I'd always found Cleare more amicable than him, but apparently even she was capable of doing something as immoral and monstrous as this. That was terrifying in its own right. Worst of all, though, was the result of her experiment: the sex change. The otome game we were in wasn't supposed to have the necessary technology to facilitate such sex changes.

Having summoned Marie and Cleare to my dorm room, I took a seat on the edge of the bed. Marie sat neatly on the floor, legs tucked under her. Cleare similarly lowered herself to the ground and stared up at me.

"Go on, then. Let's hear your excuses," I said coldly.

Marie dropped her gaze to her lap, trembling from head to toe.



“The fact that you changed a boy into a girl is troubling in itself,” said Luxion, who played the part of arbiter in our inquiry, “but it is especially damaging in light of the fact that it has reduced the pool of love interests. I should also mention the high likelihood that sex changes do not naturally exist in this world, which makes what you have done all the more egregious.”

Basically, since Aaron was now a girl, that meant there were fewer love interests available for the protagonist to potentially romance. From what I’d heard, Aaron felt like a girl in her very soul. I didn’t entirely get it, but one thing was clear—she was attracted to men, not women. The odds of her hooking up with the protagonist were slim.

Regardless of the circumstances, Marie and Cleare had shorted us on potential romance options. They had also demonstrated technology far too advanced for the times. It would have been one thing if Cleare had demonstrated her impressive technical abilities and left it at that, but she’d used an incredibly flashy manner to pull it off. People desiring a sex change might start knocking down our door hoping for the same result. Others might come hoping to learn how to do it themselves.

Maybe it was a bit late at this juncture to worry about sticking out like a sore thumb, but I certainly didn’t want the added attention.

“I’ll admit it’s a teensy bit bad we reduced the dating pool for the protagonist. Still, considering this girl’s taste in partners, I don’t think the odds were ever in our favor that she’d even date the protag. Am I incorrect?” Cleare’s words seemed stilted, as if she’d rehearsed her excuse in advance. She made no attempt to varnish the truth, instead rushing to present her argument immediately.

“You are not,” Luxion acknowledged.

“As for the whole sex change tech and all that, don’t worry. We can explain it away as a Lost Item, say it was a one-time use thing. I already told Aaron to keep it to herself.”

“Very well. I will accept that. However, I would like to inquire as to why you did not report to us about this beforehand. Your omission of the subject of your experiments is another strike against you. Had you kept us abreast of the

situation sooner, we could have stopped you before it came to this. Or am I mistaken?”

Cleare had seemed confident up until this point, but now her blue lens quickly shifted away from Luxion. Her inability to look him in the eye suggested she knew she was in the wrong.

“W-well, that’s on Rie for not remembering to say something sooner.”

Marie realized at once that the AI was trying to pin everything on her. Her head shot up. She glared venomously at Cleare. “That’s a lie and you know it! Trying to throw me under the bus so you can save yourself... That’s real lousy!”

“*You* demanded hush money!” Cleare shot back. “You’re complicit, okay? An accomplice!”

Hush money? It was my turn to glare at Marie, who promptly shrank under the pressure of my gaze. Cold beads of sweat beaded on her forehead.

“I-It’s not what you think. Please, hear me out.”

“I’m listening,” I said. “I’m willing to forgive you *if* you can convince me of your innocence.”

“W-well, you see... Cleare took money from Aaron to do the sex change! And we’re talking an insane amount, here! When I asked her what she was going to do with it all—”

“Rie, how could you?! You swore you’d have my back afterward. How can you betray me like this when you took half of the profits for yourself?”

“Oh, shut up! I needed that money to cover our living expenses!”

Her desperation to cobble together enough coin so that she could feasibly pay the costs of supporting her idiot brigade, as well as her loyal dependents Kyle and Carla, almost brought me to tears. But no, I couldn’t let myself—this was no time to sympathize. Roland had generously saddled me with the responsibility of looking after all of them. The pain and frustration Marie bore over their misdeeds would soon be mine to shoulder.

I expelled a sigh and pressed the two for more details. “Enough already. Explain to me exactly what happened during spring break.”

Marie and Cleare briefly exchanged glances before the former began, “Well, you see...”

It was quiet on the campus during spring break. The only people she passed in the corridors were professors or other school staff; just a meager few students chose to remain at the academy rather than return home.

Marie waltzed down the hallway with Cleare close behind her and passed by the academy’s bulletin board. The board was crammed with pinned papers and seemed strangely out of place, hung on a stone wall more befitting a castle than a school building. There was something incongruent about it, as if reality had been forcefully wedged into what was supposed to be the picturesque fantasy world.

Normally, Marie wouldn’t bother to so much as glance at the bulletin board. Today, however, she happened to spot a familiar face on it. She froze and did a double take.

“There’s a wanted poster for my brother?!”

She shuffled closer to inspect it. Her brother’s—sorry, Leon’s—detestable face was plastered in the middle of the poster. This shot was likely from his time in the Republic, when he was fighting with Rachel’s forces: He stood beside the captured general of the enemy fleet, sporting an unpleasant smile. It was an illustration based on an actual photo, and the creator’s apparent ill sentiments about Leon shone through. He looked even more villainous than usual. A cash reward was written at the bottom of the poster, though the currency wasn’t dia.

Cleare’s blue lens gleamed as she surveyed the pertinent information. “Oh dearie me. Master has made quite the name for himself. Converted to local currency, he’d be worth 5 million dia.”

Marie paused to convert that into Japanese yen in her head. “That’s 5 hundred million yen! He’s not worth that much!”

“That’s rather harsh, Rie.”

“What’re we gonna do about this? I can’t believe he’s a criminal now.” Marie

had the mistaken impression that this meant the law was after him.

“This is a wanted poster from the Holy Kingdom of Rachel,” Cleare explained. “They’d clap him in irons if they found him in their borders, but not here. This is just proof of how big of a threat they think Master is.”

“O-oh, right, it’s written in a foreign alphabet. But if it’s not a wanted poster from here, what’s it doing on this bulletin board?” Marie couldn’t fathom why anyone would bother to post it here.

The mystery didn’t last long. Two male students strolled past her and Cleare. They didn’t stop at all, but their eyes did briefly wander to the bulletin board.

“Foreign countries are putting out wanted posters for Mr. Leon? That guy is something else.”

“Five million dia is an insane price. He must be mega famous even outside our borders.”

Those boys had taken the poster as a positive sign.

As the two of them receded down the hallway, Marie tilted her head. “Kind of a weird reaction, isn’t it? This *is* a wanted poster.”

“The guys here must interpret the ire of foreign nations as proof of how much Master is accomplishing. This is practically a badge of honor for a knight.”

It was essentially posted on the bulletin board as a way of bragging about how amazing one of their country’s knights was. Marie was having difficulty appreciating this logic, all the same.

“It’s been a long time since I reincarnated here, but there’s so much about the culture I can’t understand for the life of me.”

Marie stared at Leon’s hateful face in the poster until a voice caught her by surprise.

“Pardon me, could I have a moment?”

Marie could guess who the voice belonged to without looking up. She expelled a small sigh before turning to face them. “You again?”

The person in question was a male student with an androgynous beauty

captivating enough to reel even Marie in. His skin was supple and smooth, his lips vibrant and inviting. He had plucked any unnecessary facial hair, and his locks were combed into a perfect style. Marie had a thing for beautiful men, but her experience from her previous life told her that the man in front of her wasn't the least bit attracted to women.

Cleare's voice practically thrummed with curiosity as she said, "You seem to have made up your mind, but have you got the cash to pay for my services?" She was well acquainted with this young man. Her blue lens zeroed in on the travel bag he'd brought with him.

"I sold off all the treasures I got my hands on when I was adventuring," he said, holding the bag in front of him. He promptly set it on the floor and opened it up to reveal the contents.

Pleased, Cleare declared, "Very good. In that case, it's time for me to keep my promise. I'll use the Lost Item on you that permits you to change your sex."

Tears of joy welled up in his eyes. "Th-thank you!"

Marie leaned in toward Cleare. She was careful to whisper quietly enough so that the male student didn't overhear her. "Hold up. Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"I don't see why not. Master gave me permission."

"He gave you permission to do *this*?!"

"*This* is the scumbag that tried to put his hands on Livia before. Master told me I could do whatever I want with anyone who tried something like that."

Marie's eyes filled with disdain. "Hey, you. Did you try to get fresh with someone who was already taken?" The accusation slipped out of her mouth before she could even think twice about it.

The man's face brimmed with regret as he nodded. "Ah...you know about that, do you? That's correct. I am—I mean, the boy I was before was a scumbag. But since then, I've finally come to realize how I really feel."

"How you really feel?" Marie echoed back, confused.

Cleare explained, "Ever wanted to destroy something because you wanted it

so bad but couldn't have it yourself? That's what our friend here is talking about."

Marie understood that feeling to some degree. The one thing she'd never been able to have in her previous life was a happy family. Her childhood was good, sure, but it was after she became an adult and had a family of her own that everything went downhill. Sometimes she would find herself consumed with envy when she saw other happy families. She could say she didn't resent those who had obtained what she could never have herself, but that would be a lie.

"...Huh, I guess I kinda get the emotions you were feeling."

But *only* the emotions. Her contempt for the man remained since he actually acted on them. For his part, the male student didn't even seem to blame her for it.

"That you can sympathize with the feeling is more than enough grace! But regardless of what I did in the past, I desperately want to make my heart's desire a reality. I don't want to be a boy anymore. I want to be a girl." There was no mistaking his conviction.

Cleare's voice boomed louder than normal as she explained, "Good, then we'll begin immediately. It'll cause a number of issues if we don't clear all this up before the new term begins."

"Thank you!" The male student beamed.

Marie looked at Cleare. "Wait, wait. Is that really your call to make? We'd better check in with my brother first..." Despite her claim that they should wait, Marie's gaze kept wandering to the bag on the ground that was filled to bursting with the kingdom's currency.

"Oh? I seem to recall Master saying you were to follow my orders."

"Urk!"

True enough, prior to leaving, Leon had driven home the point a number of times that Marie was to follow Cleare's instructions. He evidently trusted Cleare over her. Leon had taken such pains to emphasize Marie's obedience that she wasn't in much of a position to oppose Cleare.

“I can’t get in contact with him right now, anyway. Transmissions haven’t been working that well lately.”

“O-oh, they have? Then we should probably wait until—”

Cleare noticed Marie’s wandering gaze at long last and proposed, “I’ll give you a portion of that money if you do as I tell you.”

“You will?! Then I want 70 percent!” Marie opted for a sizable portion rather than to demand the entire amount. Even she knew that would be a little over the top.

“I do love that shameless streak of yours,” Cleare said, in pleasant spirits despite Marie’s outrageous request. “But that is a little *too* greedy. I’ll give you 40 percent.”

“Sixty percent! Please, I’m barely scraping by as it is!”

“Yeah, but—”

“Then how about half?! I’ll compromise and settle for half this time!”

“Wh-what do you mean you’re settling?! Rie, you do remember that you haven’t done anything, right?!”

“Give me half, and even if Big Bro gets mad at you, I’ll do what I can to mitigate the damage. Okay? Pleeeeease?” Marie’s pleading voice managed to win Cleare over at last.

Three days after the act had been performed, Marie learned the male student’s name and gave one of the most horrified shrieks of her life.

“...and that’s how it went down.”

Listening to Marie and Cleare’s explanation of what happened during spring break, I found myself overcome with the urge to scream at them. That could wait. There was one thing I had to clarify first.

“Hold on a sec. What’s this about a wanted poster? What the hell did I do?” A cold sweat began trickling down my back the moment I learned the Holy Kingdom of Rachel had put a price on my head. It was hard not to question their

sanity, offering the equivalent of a 5-billion-yen price for me.

Marie and Cleare exchanged looks.

“You kinda put us in a tough spot with that question,” said Marie. “You’ve done so much that it’s hard to point out any one thing.”

“She’s right,” Cleare added, “Rachel must absolutely hate your guts.”

That was obvious, but what had I done to deserve it? Convinced though I was that none of my supposed transgressions warranted such an extreme response, my exasperated companion, Luxion, decided to chime in and explain exactly why I deserved this.

“Master, have you forgotten? The Holy Kingdom of Rachel intervened to support the insurrectionists in the Republic. You are the one who put an end to their schemes. Moreover, when they changed their position and attempted to instead claim some of the Republic’s lands for themselves, do you recall what you did?”

The Holy Kingdom of Rachel had dispatched a fleet to steal part of the Republic’s land. Since I wanted to resolve everything peacefully, I swiped their flagship from them. Then I boarded it and took their commander as a hostage before handing him over to the Republic. I trusted Mr. Albergue would take care of whatever happened after that.

“Yep, I remember taking the commander as a live captive. But everything ended peacefully, right?”

“Peacefully for you,” Luxion quipped, “but as a humiliating defeat for them. They couldn’t so much as lift a finger against you as you took their commander. It was all the more disgraceful for them to return to their country without any major losses—further indication that they had been no match for you.”

Cleare seemed to share Luxion’s view. “You embarrassed them twice, basically. First with the failed coup and again when you caused their fleet to suffer a mortifying defeat. Like, from their point of view, they lost virtually everything thanks to a single guy.”

My attempts to resolve things without further conflict had only brought my enemy further shame. I was speechless.

Unable to bear looking at me any longer, Marie averted her gaze. “Personally, I don’t think it’s surprising at all they put a price on your head.”

Never once in my wildest dreams did I imagine my face being plastered on a wanted poster with a hefty reward. Ice-cold sweat streamed down my face as I realized the implication—my life was now at risk.

As if my anxiety hadn’t already spiked through the roof, Luxion and Cleare suddenly began surveying the room in a state of high alert. The easy, carefree atmosphere we’d been enjoying moments before was gone in a flash.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. Luxion looked more cautious than I had ever seen him before.

“My link to the drones I had positioned around the school was severed. The last thing I sensed through them before losing contact was the presence of a Demonic Suit. Master, someone is jamming us.”

My eyes narrowed the instant he mentioned a Demonic Suit. Those suits were Lost Items left over from times long past, just like Luxion and the other artificial intelligences I had encountered in my journeys here. To elaborate, Luxion and the other AIs were once the weapons of the old humans, while the Demonic Suits had belonged to the new humans. The latter were considered our enemies.

Marie frowned. Her eyebrows knitted together with worry as she recalled the other Demonic Suits we had encountered up until now. “By, um, Demonic Suits, are we talking about...y’know, *those* things? The weird parasitic things that attach themselves to people and then run amok? One of those is nearby?”

I peered out of my bedroom window, but the view outside was no different than normal; people going about their usual everyday lives. Nothing suggested something as dangerous as a Demonic Suit in the vicinity.

Cleare answered with her eye darting cautiously back and forth, “It means there’s one smart enough to consider obstructing us. It’s nothing like the fragments we’ve faced before. We’re talking about the real deal—a full suit with an intact core.”

Marie cocked her head to the side, still not fully following along.

“A Demonic Suit is a type of Armor the new humans employed,” Luxion explained. “A control unit, in this case a living core, is required to keep a suit in check. A Demonic Suit without a living core will instead take possession of a human and run wild.”

All color drained from Marie’s face as it sunk in that a fully operational, intact Demonic Suit was nearby.

“C-can we beat something like that?” she asked.

“It depends on the enemy,” Luxion said without sugarcoating anything. “That said, considering it has already destroyed the network we set up, I must assume that we are dealing with a unit of particularly high rank.”

So even among Demonic Suits, this one was pretty strong, and it was lurking somewhere within the school. It didn’t get much more dangerous than that.

“Can’t you pin down its exact location?” I asked Luxion hopefully.

“I have no information to work with at present. All I may say with certainty is that it lies somewhere within the school.”

“That’s gonna make things real inconvenient for a while,” I said. “That blows. I was hoping to get some more info.” So much for gathering more intel on the third game’s scenario.

“All we can do is set up the smaller drones around the campus en masse,” Cleare said, already formulating a strategy to maintain what security she could. “We’ll have to combat them with sheer numbers. Either way though...it sure sucks knowing there’s enemies in the school.”

“Master, for the moment I would advise against acting alone for any reason,” Luxion warned me.

“Don’t worry. I’m always about safety first. I’ll hole up in my room. Although, hmm...”

“What is it?”

“Nah, nothing too big. I just remembered that I bought a Demonic Suit from the cash shop back before I reincarnated here.”

Back when I was still alive, I had purchased two items to clear the game: One

was a migratory spaceship (Luxion) and the other was a black Demonic Suit - covered in ominous spikes.

“Oh yeah, I remember that,” Marie said as I’d kick-started her memories. “I took a peek at that in the shop, but with all those spikes and whatever...it wasn’t like, cute, you know? So I wasn’t interested. Who designs something like that for a game targeted at girls anyway?”

I couldn’t blame her for not seeing the appeal. The design definitely appealed more to men.

Luxion wasn’t pleased to hear my story. “You purchased a Demonic Suit? An erroneous misstep, indeed. I see that even prior to your life in this world, you were already making uninformed choices.”

“Master, no one in their right mind would buy a Demonic Suit,” Cleare chimed into the conversation. “It’s a waste of cash. At least give your purchases some due consideration if you insist on using the shop!”

She hated the remnants of the new humans with the same fiery passion that Luxion did. The mere mention that I’d gotten involved with them stoked the two AIs into a frenzy.

“It’s old news. Knock off the nagging, you two,” I snapped.

Still, perhaps the old Demonic Suit I had purchased existed in this world for real, just as Luxion had. It could very well prove to be a huge thorn in my side.

Chapter 1:

The First Prince

THE DAY OF THE opening ceremony had arrived. I stood before the mirror in my room, pulling my uniform over my head as I hurriedly exchanged words with a visitor. This was Prince Julius, whom I'd summoned here despite how frantic the morning was turning out to be, and he was none too pleased by the spur-of-the-moment invitation.

"You ought to have said something sooner if you planned to have me handle the opening remarks at the ceremony."

The school had come to me, trying to sound out whether I would be interested in being responsible for delivering a speech at the ceremony. It sounded like a huge pain, so I was dumping the duty on Julius instead. Now he hunkered down in my room, jotting down memos for what he was going to say.

"I'm a puny little marquess. Your rank is way more impressive than mine, right?" I said.

Luxion floated in the air beside me. He'd been even more insufferable this morning than he ordinarily was, which was no mean feat.

"Master, your tie is twisted," he informed me.

"Oops, you're right."

I unfastened it and redid it quickly, peering through the mirror to catch a glimpse of Julius. He apparently accepted the logic in my argument, but his scowl persisted.

"True, in terms of rank alone, mine is higher. Considering your strength and accomplishments are superior, however, I see why the school chose you instead. Though you don't strike me as an eloquent public speaker, I admit..."

You would never guess from our back-and-forth grumblings that I had known Julius now for close to two whole years. I couldn't have pictured speaking as casually to him as I was now when we first met. We'd hated each other's guts in

the beginning.

“That’s exactly why I’m leaving it to someone who is good at that stuff. Efficient of me, yeah?” I grinned.

I finished smoothing out my uniform as Julius wrapped up the speech he’d been writing. His speed and confidence indicated what I suspected all along—that he was accustomed to this sort of thing, having had to make all sorts of addresses to crowds in the past.

“That might sound more convincing coming from someone else. When you say it, it sounds like you’re pushing it off on me because you consider it too much of a hassle,” said Julius.

“Interpret it however you like. Anyway, I’ll forgive you for the trouble you caused during spring break since you did this for me. But you ought to be grateful.”

Julius and his moronic companions had wreaked havoc upon the school during their spring break stay. The invoice for the damages came straight to me, as their nominal supervisor. It was depressing, frankly. Why did I have to babysit the fallen prince and his comrades?

“I can’t really argue when you put it that way.” Julius sighed quietly as he folded up his speech and tucked it into the pocket of his jacket. He looked disheartened, but a brief moment later he lifted his chin and said, “I should have started my business by preparing a food cart instead.”

He hadn’t given up on that dream yet, then.

“You act like a man possessed when it comes to skewers. Is that it?” I asked.

“Possessed? How ghoulish! At least frame it in a more positive light. Say that I’m blessed by the goddess of skewers, perhaps... I do love them just as much as I love Marie.”

I got the point he was trying to make, but the pompous way he put it was so exaggerated that I burst into laughter. I knew from secondhand accounts how deeply he treasured skewers, but come on. The joke wasn’t any less hilarious even now.

“Marie’s on the same level as skewers, huh? I bet she’d have a pretty comical reaction if I told her that.”

Luxion, bobbing beside my right shoulder as usual, moved his lens from side to side in a show of exasperation. “I can scarcely believe this man was once the crown prince people expected such great things of. I doubt anyone would imagine he would be in this sorry state a few years ago. The one saving grace is that he is happy with this outcome.”

Julius didn’t seem flustered by our sarcastic remarks. If anything, his pride swelled in the face of them.

“Quite right. I’m incredibly lucky to have found two incredibly precious and irreplaceable things. I am grateful both to Marie and the man who first introduced me to skewers.” He locked eyes with me as his entire face glimmered with a smile.

I traded glances with Luxion.

“Sure is tough to deal with idiots, huh?”

“Indeed. They are as impervious to sarcasm as they are to snide comments.”

At around that same time, Marie and Carla were walking from the main school building to the auditorium where the opening ceremony would be held. The two earned some fairly hostile looks as they passed through a connecting corridor. The other students’ disgruntled expressions hinted at what they were likely wondering in unison: *What are you guys doing here?*

Yet for all the derision Marie and Carla faced, not a soul said anything to them directly. There was one significant reason for that—they were under the newly titled marquess’s care.

In spite of her peers’ scorn, Marie strode confidently through the hall to hide her irritation. “How come they’re all acting so bitter with me, huh?! Those three dummies are the ones who altered their uniforms without permission! Scold Leon if you want to take someone to task. He’s the one in charge of them!”

“It’s unavoidable, really,” Carla said, trying to placate her mistress. “Only the

headmaster has enough authority to summon the marquess and admonish him, no one else... I'm more exasperated by those three for pulling this nonsense on the very first day of school." A breathy sigh escaped her lips.

The culprits this time were Brad, Greg, and Chris. All three boys had matured a bit during their time in the Republic, but not so much that they'd refrained from "improving" their academy uniforms. Brad opted to accentuate his uniform with gaudy ornamentation, while Greg tore the sleeves off his shirt and jacket, leaving his arms visible to the shoulder, and Chris tailored his jacket into a happi coat. The boys had been called in to the teacher's office for violating school rules on the very first day of term. Marie was unlucky enough to be summoned alongside them, where she received a reprimand of her own. She apologized profusely for their misbehavior—what other real choice did she have?—but she was livid about needing to take responsibility.

"Since when did I become their keeper, huh?!"

"P-please calm down, Lady Marie!"

Marie's voice grew louder and louder as her anger swelled, while Carla tried desperately to soothe her. The two of them came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the walkway so that Marie could try to compose her breathing. By mere coincidence, she happened to peer out and spot two employees tending to the inner courtyard. Carla noticed her staring and followed her gaze.

"Are those new employees?" Carla asked.

"Seems like it."

One of the two employees was younger, likely a newbie. They were currently being scolded by the older veteran.

"Can't you put in a little more effort? Look at the trees you trimmed. Each and every one of them looks a mess. You've done enough here. Go pull some weeds or something."

The newbie was a blond-haired man. Marie initially felt sorry for him until she saw how lousy his attitude was. Far from pledging to put more effort into his work, instead he sneered down his nose at the veteran. "I've done enough already, right? Can I get off work yet?"

“Of course you can’t!”

The veteran employee seemed exasperated with the younger man’s blatant distaste for the job. With all the trouble the newbie was causing, Marie didn’t feel an ounce of sympathy. The exchange brought back memories of her earlier desperate attempts to appease the teachers, as if she was somehow at fault for how the boys had behaved. Her anger flooded back with fresh zeal. Seeing how badly the newbie had tended to the courtyard only made her temper worse.

“Even I could do a better job than him,” she grumbled.

Memories of their time abroad flooded back into Carla’s mind. She smiled sadly, only for her face to fall into despair when she remembered the tiring days spent tending to the vegetation in the summer. The grass and weeds had grown back relentlessly fast.

“Ah ha ha, it was rough while we were in the Republic—especially in the summer months. The yard would grow out of control right away unless you tended to it daily. That experience was how I learned to use gardening tools... I even had callouses on my hands from all the hard work.”

“You and me both.”

It wasn’t because she underestimated how much work his job entailed that Marie sneered at him. She’d gotten a taste of exactly how tough that menial labor was back in the Republic. She only spoke up because she knew she could outperform this boy if she put her mind to it.

Marie peeled her gaze away from the workers and continued walking. “I wonder if the school is lacking employees to keep things maintained. I heard before that they only picked the finest candidates to work here.”

A slovenly hire like that would never have passed muster a few years ago, in other words.

“It’s a rough time for the Kingdom,” Carla said, offering her own speculation on the matter. “I suspect you’re right that they’re lacking necessary helping hands.”

Marie sighed. Things were drastically different from how she remembered them before she left to study abroad. As if to illustrate that point, she spotted

an earl's heir up ahead who was arrogantly throwing his weight around, flanked by a number of female groupies. He strutted through the halls confidently and showed no compunction about snapping at a couple of female students who he felt were blocking his path.

"You're in the way. Move it!"

"M-my apologies."

The girls hurriedly apologized and shrank away to make room for him.

It wasn't like this when I was a first-year. I guess when things change, they change fast. I almost feel like I'm trapped in a dating sim world meant for guys, not girls...not that I'd know what those are like. Marie had never played dating games for boys, but she imagined the women in them were treated with a similar level of disrespect. *Nice world to live in if you're a guy, I guess. Wonder if Big Bro is happy about this shift?*

The yawn-inducing opening ceremony came to a close. As new students filed out of the auditorium, I found myself being dragged out by the ear by none other than one of my very own fiancées, Angelica Rapha Redgrave or Angie for short.

"Ow. That hurts!"

Angie frowned and continued to grip my ear firmly. She was pissed at me for making Julius act as the student representative in my stead. "You should have told Julius sooner if you wanted to shove your duties onto him, you fool."

"It's not my fault! Not really, anyway. They asked me out of nowhere. I wish *they* had given *me* some heads-up first."

"I wish you had consulted me earlier as well," she retorted.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry."

"I can't blame him for being nervous if they asked him to do this out of nowhere." My second fiancée, Olivia (or Livia for short), was compassionate enough to see my point of view. She cocked her head to the side in obvious puzzlement. "But why did they put this on his shoulders in the first place, I

wonder...”

My third fiancée was present as well; Noelle Zel Lespinasse, a girl who originally hailed from the Alzer Republic. Her noble status was equivalent to that of a princess, but due to her commoner upbringing she spoke far more casually than you would expect. Her hair was pulled into a side ponytail on the right side of her head and she was currently decked out in our school’s uniform.

“Betcha the school didn’t have much of a choice, since Leon shot up in aristocratic ranking again,” Noelle said. “I mean, think about it. If he’d stayed an earl, they could get away with having Prince Julius do the honors. Leon becoming a marquess must have sent everything into a panic. I bet they had a huge internal argument over who to pick.”

Noelle’s reasoning made sense. The school staff were in a deadlock about who to call upon for the speech until the last minute, which explained why they couldn’t inform me until the day of the ceremony. Even so, knowing my selection had been a source of debate didn’t make me feel any better.

Livia clapped her hands. “That seems likely!”

“Right?!” Noelle grinned.

Their cheerful exchange prompted a sour-looking Angie to release my ear at last, at which point she launched into an explanation about the circumstances.

“I hate to disappoint, but that wasn’t how it happened,” she said. “They chose Leon specifically because they didn’t want Prince Julius in charge of the speech.”

I massaged my throbbing red ear as I glanced back at Angie. “Why’s that? ‘Cause he’s a total moron?”

“As much as I would like to agree that’s the reason, there was more to it. Do you see those new students over there that are peering over at us?” Angie shot a pointed look up ahead, where the first-years were spilling out of the auditorium. Coming up at the end of the line was a blond boy whose eyes were trained upon us. A significantly taller boy with striking red hair strode beside him.

“You know those guys?”

Noelle shook her head, and Livia soon did the same. Angie was the only one familiar with the two.

“That is Prince Jake,” she informed us. “The boy with the red hair is his foster brother, Oscar.”

“Prince? So he’s Julius’s younger brother?”

I had already heard of Prince Jake from Marie; he was one of the love interests from the third installment of the game and something of a black sheep in the royal family. I figured Angie was likely to have a more detailed explanation, and she didn’t disappoint.

“From Prince Julius’s perspective, he’s only his half brother. They have different mothers. Prince Jake is now the first in line of succession, however, which makes him the strongest candidate for being named crown prince.”

“Strongest candidate?” Livia echoed in confusion. “But, um, Prince Julius was already disinherited...so shouldn’t his half brother become crown prince automatically?”

“It’s a little more complex than that. Prince Jake is overflowing with ambition too, which makes things trickier. When Prince Julius still held his position as crown prince, Prince Jake went out of his way to spread word that he would eventually wear the crown instead.”

That was a pretty obnoxious move for him to pull when Julius had already been named as the king’s successor.

Noelle cupped a hand over her chin. “If they’re vying against one another for power, it makes sense they would want to avoid having Prince Julius deliver the speech. But...aren’t they blowing things a little out of proportion?”

I agreed. More to the point, I didn’t want to be caught in the middle of a sibling dispute.

“He’ll get to be the next king as long as he keeps a low profile, right? I don’t see why he’d want to cause unnecessary trouble,” I said.

Angie dropped her gaze. “At court, Prince Jake has a reputation for doing exactly that. The school administration likely didn’t want to get involved with

such a sensitive matter, so they're being extra cautious."

"Huh." Even the school viewed him as a problem child with too much power? I definitely didn't want to get involved with a guy like that.

The auditorium emptied, and the long queue of students began to ebb. Prince Jake and his buddy Oscar chose this moment to step out of the doors.

"Leon," Angie said, voice stern. "You'll find more and more people will approach you in the future. Many will be your average riffraff and we won't have to worry much about them, but occasionally some truly burdensome characters will show up. Whatever you do, don't make any foolish promises to them."

"I'm a marquess in name only. Who's gonna waste time trying to brown nose with me?" I laughed Angie's warning off, but her expression remained dead serious.

"If your rank were an empty title, every other aristocrat in the Kingdom would treat you like a useless waste of space."

That sobered me. "Ah. So things are gonna be pretty rough moving forward?"

Angie's face softened when she realized I was taking the problem seriously. "Well, you will increasingly need to deal with prominent people. I know you detest having to handle social engagements like that. The one thing to keep in mind is that you must keep your guard up with those people at all times... You should be wary even with my family."

"Your family? But the Redgraves have taken such good care of me all this time..."

I was curious about the meaning behind her words and why she would caution me about her own flesh and blood. Ordinarily, I would lean heavily on the Redgraves for support *because* of her link to them. Angie's manner didn't suggest she had any evidence to substantiate her fears, but something behind the scenes at home must have been ominous enough to put her on edge.

"My father and older brother are plotting something. If nothing comes of it, then that's fine, but I can make no guarantees either way at this point," said Angie.

“Shouldn’t it normally be the other way around?” Noelle asked. She looked confused by Angie’s attitude. “I would’ve guessed you’d ask Leon to help your family out, not warn him away.”

Angie hooked her left hand on her hip, rolled back her shoulders, and placed her left hand over her puffed out chest. With the confidence of a swoon-worthy heartthrob, she declared, “I am Leon’s future wife. However other people may think of me, my foremost priority is the prosperity of *our* family.”

Livia giggled. “You’re saying that Mr. Leon is your first priority, right?” She had summarized the unspoken meaning of Angie’s words, but I wasn’t sure how to respond to them.

All three girls turned their expectant faces toward me. I cast my gaze away and scratched the top of my head.

Luxion had watched quietly throughout this interaction until now. “You are so perfectly predictable, Master,” he remarked. “An opportune moment to deliver some witty, honeyed words falls in your lap and you *still* fail to do so.”

Put a sock in it.

Although if there were a perfect response to use in situations like this, I wished he would tell me.

“Why do I gotta spend the afternoon hours with you guys?”

After the opening ceremony ended, midday soon rolled around. I had free time during this period instead of regular classes, which was why I found myself behind the dormitory building. Luxion and I weren’t the only ones here—Marie and her, ahem, *delightful* companions were present as well. They had invited me to lunch but led me here instead of to the cafeteria for some reason.

Julius had created a makeshift brick furnace, upon which he set a wire cooking grate to grill some skewered meat and vegetables. His hands moved with practiced precision; he even hummed to himself as he cooked.

“Just wait a little bit longer, everyone. I’ll have this ready for you in no time.”

Perhaps in some ways it was quite the privilege to have a prince grilling

skewers for us.

Assisting Julius and piling the fully grilled skewers onto a garish, pretentious-looking plate was none other than the biggest loser of the moronic five: Jilk.

“Your Highness, why not let me trade places with you? You won’t be able to fully enjoy the food if you insist on handling all the cooking.”

“Nothing to worry about,” Julius assured his foster brother. “I’m happier this way.”

It had been hilarious to watch the prince devote himself to skewers like this back when it was none of my business, but now that I was in charge of him, the sight had lost its humor. My thoughts wandered. *How could I turn him back into a proper prince?* But then there was the radiant smile on his face as he busily grilled. Maybe it was best to leave him like this.

Greg was plucking out only the meat skewers to eat for himself. Greg was nowhere near as terrible as Jilk, but he was one of the three dimwits who had altered their uniforms. He’d torn away the sleeves of his jacket and T-shirt, and then ripped his pants just above the knees. With all the hard work he’d put in to beef up his muscles, I guessed he preferred less restrictive clothing...though the more likely answer was that he wanted to show off his guns.

I wonder which explanation is the right one.

“I had a bad feelin’ something was up since Julius invited me to eat here,” Greg said in between scarfing down the meat skewers. He looked pretty displeased about the feast before him.

And why wouldn’t he? Any time Julius was in charge of meal prep, skewers would be the only item on the menu. He tried to provide a variety of different meats and vegetables, but skewers were skewers even when you changed up the ingredients. Marie and the rest of the team had naturally grown sick of this constant stream of skewers for every meal.

“It does get tiring eating skewers day in and day out. Your Highness, could we not at least limit it to once a week?” Chris suggested. He had altered his jacket into a happi coat and was wearing a twisted hachimaki headband on top of his head. The steam from the skewers fogged up his glasses as he ate.

Julius lifted his gaze from the grill. Much to my surprise, he seemed to agree. “Really? All right. One day a week, then. We’ll have one day that isn’t skewers.”

“I was requesting the opposite, Your Highness. You twisted my words on purpose, didn’t you?”

If anything’s twisted here, it’s your outfits.

Brad, the one who’d made the most ostentatious additions to his uniform, was lost in pointless contemplation as he nibbled at his food. “Hmm. I wonder... if I can master eating skewers elegantly, will that raise my appeal to—gaaaah?! Some sauce got on my uniform!” He broke into a wailing lament over sullyng his precious clothes.

I ignored him and turned my attention to Marie, who was busy chatting with Carla. The change in the school rules meant she could no longer bring Kyle, her personal servant, to school with her. He was staying at my family’s home instead. Kyle didn’t need to be physically present to be the topic of their conversation, however.

“It’s rough not having Kyle around to help. Now there’s only two of us to look after those five,” Marie grumbled. She shot a cold look at Brad, who was flailing around in a panic about his ruined uniform. I assumed she was already grumpy over what a mess it would be to launder it.

Carla nodded as she ate. “True, but at least he’s able to relax and spend some quality time with his mother.”

“You’ve got a point there. Oh, hey, I think this skewer is the best one I’ve tasted yet.” In spite of the depressing atmosphere around her, Marie was managing to enjoy the food. She’d blurted out her opinion on the quality without much forethought, but Julius was delighted to receive her compliment.

“I prepared the best of the lot specifically for you, Marie. Since they demolished my chicken coop, I butchered Jack, one of the younger chickens. Oh, he was a wild one! But very adorable.”

Everyone froze midway through eating the moment they heard about where their food had come from—and that it had a name. Even I was put off by Julius’s behavior. Marie stepped up to summarize our feelings.

“Julius, I thought I told you not to give your livestock names? Anyway, don’t recount fond memories of your chicken while we’re trying to eat it. How is a girl meant to keep her appetite after that?!”

Julius countered, “I wish for us all to appreciate the significance in consuming the life of another—”

Before he could finish dishing out his flimsy excuse, an uninvited guest appeared on the scene to interrupt the festivities.

“It’s been a long time, *Prince* Julius.”

Prince Jake had arrived with his own foster brother, Oscar, in tow.

Julius turned to face his younger half brother. He was still wearing his apron. “Ah, Jake. What do you want all of a sudden?”

“I don’t want anything from you. I have no interest in you now that you have been disinherited...over a stupid *woman*, of all things.”

His indirect insult to Marie nearly provoked the rest of the boys to leap at him with fists raised. It was only because Julius lifted a hand to stop them that they paused.

“Abrasive as ever, I see,” said Julius. “Then why are you here? To mock me?”

“Now that does sound like fun...but I actually came to see someone else.” Prince Jake made a beeline for me, flashing a decidedly savage, belligerent smirk. “We’ve glimpsed each other in passing a number of times, but I haven’t been able to introduce myself yet. I’m Jake Rapha Holfort. Since that moron over there was disinherited, I’m first in the line of succession.”

Prince Jake had wavy, short blond hair and blue eyes. He looked like the picture-perfect prince. A bit on the short side, he had a handsome albeit obnoxious face that matched perfectly with his brazen attitude.

The prince glanced back at the man flanking him. “This is my foster brother.”

This man wore a solemn expression on his face that was all the more striking when contrasted with his brother. He had a lean, muscular frame and was significantly taller than Prince Jake, with long red hair tied back in a ponytail.

“Oscar Fia Hogan. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

His introduction was more stilted than the prince's. According to Marie, he was another one of the love interests for the third game.

I sighed before returning the favor with my own introduction. "You may already know by now, but I'm Leon, the guy your father pushed a bunch of unwanted promotions on. Hate to break it to you, but I've not got financial help or influence to offer you. Go look elsewhere if you're after political allies."

I made my lack of interest plain and clear but failed to dissuade Prince Jake. He grinned at me. "I can secure financial backing and influence later. What I want is the Hero of Holfort's power—the power that vanquished the Alzer Republic. I'm hoping you'll be wise and side with the right person."

"That's you, I assume?"

"I'm not one to beat around the bush, Bartfort, so allow me to be frank with you. I want you to join my faction and back my claim to the throne. Do that and I'll ensure you rise up even further in the ranks. That fool prince beside you is incapable of doing the same." He shot a triumphant look at Julius.

This kid doesn't know squat about me. Is he really under the false assumption that I became a marquess because I wanted to? He's not even using my title! He's calling me by my last name like a pretentious brat.

"I'll pass," I said.

Neither Marie nor her delightful companions seemed surprised by my response. "Figures," they chorused.

Prince Jake, on the other hand, was flabbergasted. Flustered, he stammered, "D-did you even hear what I said? If you swear allegiance to me, you could seriously become a duke someday!"

"I never wanted any of these stupid titles to begin with!"

His face contorted. For a power-hungry political climber like Prince Jake, it was unfathomable that I would want the exact opposite. He shook his head and turned to Oscar.

"Then we'll need to discuss this further, I suppose. Oscar, bring the marquess along."

“Yes, my lord! Marquess Bartfort, allow me to apologize in advance for the rough treatment.”

Oscar stepped toward me, hands outstretched, ready to manhandle me—until Greg intervened to stop him. As embarrassing as he looked in that getup, I gave him props for having the guts to step in and protect his superior.

“Hold it. You think we’re gonna let you just drag Leon away that easily?”

“Hmph.”

Greg’s attempt at intimidation only elicited an enigmatic smile from Oscar. His attitude must have hit a nerve with Greg; his muscles visibly swelled with anger. He peeled off his jacket and threw it aside as he glowered at Oscar.

“You wanna duke it out? That it?”

Strong fighting words...except, instead of taking a martial arts stance, Greg was posing to show off his muscles. He smirked arrogantly at his opponent as he showed off his pectorals.

Wow, thanks. Now I feel like a real chump for expecting anything out of you in the first place. The hell are you doing?!

Oscar watched him and soon shed his own jacket, following Greg’s example. He turned away from us, posing to display his bulging back muscles.

Greg’s eyes flew wide open. “Wh-what?!” he gasped.

Oscar was ripped enough to rival Greg. His body bespoke a different type of strength; he maintained a slender frame, although his muscles indicated a vigorous daily regimen.

“A true man speaks with his back,” said Oscar. “I doubt you would understand, given that all your muscles are focused on the front of your body.”

“D-dammit!”

The two were locked in place posing for one another, showing off their muscles, but uh... *I kinda wish Oscar would realize who he’s pointing his body at. His back is facing us, so his front...*

Prince Jake cried, “Oscar! What’s the meaning of this?! Two beefy men are

glaring straight at me!”

Both men had menacing expressions on their faces as they flexed. Greg faced forward, of course, with Prince Jake straight ahead. Since Oscar had his back turned, he was flexing straight in the prince’s face as well.

“This formation puts me all on my own here! Aren’t you supposed to be on my side?!”

I was starting to feel sorry for Prince Jake. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on him so without Oscar by his side, he brought felt intimidated and outnumbered. His foster brother turning out to be a muscle-bound airhead only made his situation more pitiful.

“Your Highness, please keep quiet so I can stay focused. This is a battle between men,” said Oscar.

“Don’t you dare forget the order I gave you, Oscar! You’re supposed to be my foster brother and my foremost retainer, aren’t you?! You should treat me better!”

I glanced at Julius. “Hey, so is Prince Jake normally like this?”

Julius pulled a face. “As you can see, he’s ambition personified. But yeah, in general, Oscar’s not a bad guy. What you see is what you get.”

We continued to watch the two of them bicker, and soon Jilk jumped in to provide his own impressions. “Oscar hasn’t changed a bit... Muscles are all he’s got on his mind. Prince Jake has it rough. Your Highness, you were quite lucky to have me as a foster brother.” He grinned even as he mocked Oscar, every word dripping confidence in his own superiority. The man was already complete garbage in my eyes, but talk about a lousy personality!

Julius glanced between Jilk and Oscar before blurting out, “I personally would have preferred Oscar over you.”

Jilk chuckled. “Oh, Your Highness! You almost had me there for a moment.”

“No, I was being serious.”

There was a brief pause as Jilk registered what he’d been told. “What...? But, Your Highness, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like.”

Those words were like a gust of arctic air that froze Jilk in place like an ice statue.

Meanwhile, Prince Jake was trembling in fear, unable to withstand the menacing looks Oscar and Greg were shooting in his direction. I couldn't blame him for floundering in the face of...that. I wouldn't know what to do either.

How had things gone so wrong? Why were we watching two men trying to outperform each other to determine whose muscles were more impressive?

Marie continued blithely snacking away on her skewers as she wandered over to me. “So, what're we gonna do about this?”

“Good question. I guess we should report this to the school administration?”

Angie had mentioned as much earlier, right after the opening ceremony ended, but the school seemed loath to involve itself in a power struggle to determine the next crown prince whatsoever—let alone for such a conflict to take place on its grounds. This could be an excellent opportunity to have them put Prince Jake in his place so he didn't try anything else.

“Guess that's all we can do.” Marie munched as noisily as ever. Once she was finished, she tossed her garbage toward a nearby trash bag. It sailed straight inside. Triumphant over her surprisingly adept tossing skills, she snapped her fingers. “I did it!”

I glanced at her, only to feel someone else's eyes on me at the same time. I surveyed the area curiously and spotted a silhouette near the main building. An unfamiliar yet conspicuous male student with brown skin and silver hair was peering at our group. The moment he caught me looking, he turned and left.

“What was that about?”

Something about him niggled at my mind. I couldn't quite tell why.

“Dammit!”

Jake had been cast into what the school called a Probationary Room, where he was violently slamming his foot against the door. The professors brought him

here on the basis that he'd caused a disruption at the school, but Julius and his companions had been let off with only a strict scolding for an almost identical offense. Typical. People were always showing favoritism to his older half brother. Jake couldn't stand it.

The prince hurled himself into the room's sole chair and glared at the entrance. The wooden door had a small window inlaid near the top with iron bars over it.

"This kind of treatment is impermissible! Don't you agree, Oscar?" Jake demanded of his foster brother, loud enough that his voice reached the hallway.

"It is?"

"Don't say it like it's a question, just agree with me! Fine, I'll admit I went too far, but you of all people should cut me more slack than this!"

Had their spat been a normal one between students, Jake would have gotten off with a harsh scolding like the others. Unfortunately for him, he had dragged a political conflict onto school grounds. The power struggle to determine the official successor was a delicate topic and not one the teachers could permit here. Jake's actions had already been reported to the royal court, who in turn advised the school to deliver severe punishment.

"You went too far trying to solicit the marquess on the first day of school," Oscar said from beyond the door. "You have all the professors here in a panic because you've brought the problem of succession into the academy."

"No doubt. This whole ordeal is a huge pain in the butt that they don't want to be swept up in, I assume."

"If you understand their position, why did you risk it? You knew exactly what would happen, didn't you, Your Highness?"

"That's enough. Stop talking, Oscar."

Jake folded his legs and sulked. *Why is my foster brother such an idiot? I wish he was as capable as Jilk. Then he could be of actual assistance to me.* He thought swapping Oscar for Jilk would make quite the favorable trade, given how good Jilk was at thinking on his feet.

Jake took a long, deep breath.

“Summon Bartfort here, Oscar.”

“A-are you serious, Your Highness?”

“Of course I am. I’m not about to give up after a single lousy failure. Call Bartfort here immediately. I’ll take care of the negotiations.”

“Oh, Your Highness! At long last... Very well! I will summon Bartfort here at once!”

“Uh...yeah.”

Oscar’s reaction was a bit bizarre, but no matter. All Jake could do was wait for him to bring Bartfort along and hope his brother would obey orders this time around.

Around ten to twenty minutes or so later, Oscar finally brought Bartfort to Jake.

“I did as you asked, Your Highness! What a joyous occasion, to think you have finally shown interest in women!” Oscar beamed from ear to ear as he escorted Marquess Bartfort’s younger sister to the door.

From the other side of the door, she called to Jake in a sugary sweet voice. “Prince Jake, my name is Finley Fou Bartfort. I never dreamed a day would come when you, of all people, would summon me like this.”

Jake couldn’t see the girl through the door, but it was as plain to him as anyone that Oscar had completely misinterpreted his orders. He cradled his head in his hands, overwhelmed with frustration.

“Oscar,” he asked calmly, “Why have you brought that girl with you?”

Oscar’s grinning face appeared in the tiny window at the top of the door. “What’s the matter? *You* told me to get her, so I did. And here she is, Miss Finley Bartfort! I must admit, I had no idea you harbored feelings for one of your classmates, let alone Miss Finley specifically.”

Jake and Finley were both in the upper class and in the same year. That was

the only part of Oscar's speech that held any accuracy. Given Jake and Oscar's discussion prior to the former leaving to retrieve "Bartfort," it should have been crystal clear that Jake did not mean Finley.

Jake shot to his feet with such speed that he toppled his chair over. "I ordered you to bring *Leon* to me! Are you an idiot? Well? Are you?! I assume you must be, Oscar. Meaning this is my fault for not giving you more clear and concise instructions."

Jake had known his foster brother for many years now, and as a result felt that there was no excuse for him underestimating what a moron Oscar was. Oscar, for his part, wasn't finished misinterpreting the prince's words.

"Your Highness, I had no idea your preferences leaned that way. I am so embarrassed for myself, that I didn't realize it sooner."

"Hey. Hold it right there. What are you getting wrong this time?"

"Nothing! Now I understand you haven't fallen for Miss Finley at all but for her brother. Lord Leon."

"*Oscaaaaaar!*" Jake screeched at the top of his lungs. "Who said anything at any point about my romantic preferences, huh?!"

He launched into a long, admonishing sermon, but before long a professor showed up to scold both young men for the commotion.

Chapter 2:

Unexpected

WHEN EVENING ROLLED AROUND that same day, I took Luxion and Marie with me to a cheap pub, since there were many topics we couldn't really discuss on school grounds. This particular pub had partitions like a Japanese-style izakaya, providing guests with private rooms. The whole place was alive with chatter from the moment we walked in.

This place was a real hole in the wall. It was far from the main street and tucked into a series of maze-like alleyways, so students from the academy rarely came here.

The three of us sat around an oval table, where one of the servers soon dished out the food we had ordered.

"Sorry for the wait! You two ordered an awful lot. You sure you're gonna finish this?"

The food looked divine, but the server had a point. Each plate was piled high with enough grub to fill up a person. Marie's eyes lit up, darting from plate to plate. She had ordered all of it.

"Not a problem!" she said. "Although I do want to order another dish later to take home with me as a gift, but that can wait until we're done eating."

"Right, uh...of course." The server gave a strained smile, obviously put off. It was bad enough that Marie had shamelessly ordered half the menu, but she had the gall to announce she'd be ordering even *more* later.

No sooner did the server leave than Marie announced she was digging in, knife and fork in each hand. She speared a large chunk of meat and began wolfing it down. Her voracious appetite was obnoxious beyond belief, but I ignored her and set about arranging the pictures Luxion had prepared between the gaps of the many plates covering the table.

"Before I eat, let's chat. Luxion and Cleare snapped a number of shots: some

of people who will be pivotal in the days to come, some of suspicious figures.”

“I would have gathered even more detailed information had it not been for foreign interference,” Luxion clarified.

A Demonic Suit had found its way into the school and jammed Luxion and Cleare’s drones, meaning Luxion and Cleare’s investigative abilities took a significant hit. Still, they’d gathered more than either Marie or I could have done alone. I was grateful for the intel.

The problem was that the third installment of the otome game covered the upcoming school year, and none of us knew much about it. Marie, for all her obsession with these types of dating sims, had only made it halfway through the third—she had never completed a single run.

Marie stuffed more food into her mouth as she reached over to pick up the photographs and study them. While she hadn’t looked at any behind-the-scenes materials for the game, she had looked up enough spoilers that she knew the broad strokes of how the ending played out and who the love interests were. But that was all second-hand information; we only had detailed first-hand info up until the midway point.

It probably went without saying that I was completely in the dark about this game. I’d only played the first one.

“These five are the love interests,” Marie said.

“Although one of them is now a woman,” I reminded her.

Three I knew of already: Erin (previously Aaron), Prince Jake, and Oscar. That left only two unfamiliar faces. Marie had listed off their distinguishing characteristics to Luxion for his search, and so I was fairly confident we had the right guys.

Marie bit into a piece of bread as she snatched up another picture. “Pretty positive this is the protagonist right here.”

Luxion explained from his vantage point above the table, “I managed to identify her using Marie’s descriptions. She is an exchange student from the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit.”

Marie chomped down on her fork, making it bounce up and down as she spoke. “Then it’s gotta be her. Huh. She really chose here to do her exchange program?”

“Come on, have some table manners,” I grumbled.

“It’s just the two of us. Are you *that* worried about manners? You’re one anal guy.”

All I did was point out how slovenly she was being. Was that worth being called “anal” over? *Little sisters are truly insufferable.*

Marie pried the fork from her mouth at last to finish her thought. “With all the problems happening here in the Kingdom, I kinda thought she’d stay home.”

Not only had we gone to war with the Principality, but then there’d been that stink about a coup in the Alzer Republic. Anyone who wanted to study here after all of that had nerves of steel.

Marie handed the picture of the protagonist to me.

This time around, our girl had a petite frame and reddish-brown hair pulled into a ponytail. Calling her “delicate” would be pushing it; she was slightly taller than Marie with much more attractive proportions.

“Y’know, this first-year has you totally beat in the looks department—bwah!” My attempt to mock Marie ended with me having a cup of water splashed into my face. There was a decent amount of liquid in there too.

“Well *sorr-ee* for not being more attractive!” Marie huffed.

No sense of humor whatsoever.

Ignoring the two of us, Luxion went on, “The girl’s name is Mia. She transferred into the upper class during her stint study abroad here. However, one thing differed from the information Marie gave me.”

“What’s that? If she’s in the upper class, then everything sounds just like it was in the game’s scenario to me,” Marie said.

“She has a guardian knight at her side.”

Marie tilted her head. “What the heck is a guardian knight?”

“Per the Empire’s system, women of high rank are permitted personal knights to serve them. These are referred to as guardian knights.”

“They are? News to me. I’ve never heard of that before.”

Marie was bowled over by this new information. I reached for one of the photos while she reeled and checked it over. This guardian knight who had accompanied the protagonist here from the Empire was the same guy I caught staring at us from afar today during lunch.

The man had red eyes, brown skin, and long silver hair tied back behind his head. He was an attractive guy by women’s standards, and his tall, sinewy frame spoke to some dedicated muscle training. Nothing about him would have clued me in that he was a knight of the Empire.

Marie noticed me staring. “Who’s that? Show me.” She plucked the photo from my hands before I had a chance to give it to her. Her eyes lit up the moment she spotted this unexpected addition to our cast. “He’s freakin’ gorgeous!” Marie was always a sucker for a guy with a pretty face.

I snorted with derisive laughter. It was annoying how predictable her reaction was. “So that’s our guardian knight?”

I had noticed him earlier in the day, but Marie must have missed him altogether. She kept ogling his photo. “What’s his name?”

I glanced at Luxion. His scrutinizing gaze was focused on the photo as well.

“His name is Finn Leta Hering. His middle name, Leta, is used in the Empire to indicate one’s knight status. I was unable to obtain any more detailed information about him, but he does seem particularly wary of us.”

What intel Luxion had brought us amounted to very little in the end. I understood that his ability to investigate was hampered by the presence of the Demonic Suit, but still... It was peculiar that he’d scrounged up such meager information.

“Still curious as to why I caught him staring at us during lunch,” I said.

Marie perked up in her seat. “He was staring? Why didn’t you say

something?”

I gave her a blank stare. “Have you completely forgotten what our objective is? Here’s a guy who wasn’t in the original cast serving at the protagonist’s side, and he seems to be on guard with us.” Marie was so ecstatic over his hotness that she couldn’t pick up on the numerous red flags, so I pointed them out for her.

“Yeah, that is kinda suspicious.”

Finn wasn’t originally intended to be part of the game. That might mean that he had reincarnated here similarly to how Marie and I had...but then again, maybe not. I was busy rotating that conundrum over in my head when clamor erupted in the street outside.

“Y-you won’t believe it! Just outside, there’s a person—a body!” someone shouted incoherently. The stranger, three sheets to the wind, had ventured through the front door of the pub to get a peek at what all the fuss was about. Seconds later he scrambled back inside, face ashen.

I decided to get a look at the scene for myself and see what was up.

“I’m gonna go check it out. Come on, Luxion.”

“Very well, Master.”

I stepped out of the pub and spotted a crowd of people some twenty or more meters away. Since this pub was tucked inside a network of alleyways, there were dozens of other buildings nearby. It was such a closed-in area, with such narrow streets, that people scrambled to the scene moments after anything happened.

“How awful!”

“Seems to be high-ranking too.”

“This man’s a noble! It looks like his whole entourage was killed off as well.”

I shouldered my way through the crowd, apologizing to the other bystanders as I worked my way up to the center of all the commotion. A man—he looked like an aristocrat—lay collapsed on the ground. His guards and the rest of his

retinue were sprawled out nearby as well, but nothing suggested that any sort of conflict had taken place.

My hand flew to my mouth out of instinct, anticipating a wave of nausea at the sight...but much to my dismay, none came. Any appetite I once had was long gone, but the corpse didn't turn my stomach; I was too used to carnage by now. The human brain could become desensitized to some seriously brutal things.

A hand clapped down on my shoulder as I was studying the dead man on the floor.

"What a coincidence, brat." The hand belonged to a man cloaked in a suspicious robe with a hood pulled over his head, shadowing his face. I didn't have to see him to recognize him.

"What are *you* doing here?" I snapped back.

Roland lifted enough that he could flash a grin at me. "Where I go and what I do is hardly your business, now, is it?"

"I can already guess there's a woman involved."

"The only reprieve my poor heart ever has is the sweet, fleeting time I spend with a woman. But I digress. Since you're here, come with me a moment."

As apprehensive as I was to entertain any request coming out of his mouth, Roland's expression was so solemn that I felt compelled to hear him out. I obediently followed him into one of the neighboring narrow alleyways. Once we were finally far enough away from any people, he started to explain the situation.

"That man is a government official of respectable standing within the royal court."

From what I glimpsed of the man's clothes, he didn't look like a low-ranking official. More like a guy in middle management.

Roland continued, "The man hails from a knight family. He was given odd jobs to do within the court in the past, but after the conflict you started with the Principality, his superiors were made redundant. This enabled him to move up

to a more respectable position.”

There were many deserters during the war with the Principality. All were marked as traitors and lost all prestige and status as a result, as did their families. Many lower-ranking aristocrats earned promotions in the aftermath, and plenty of those lower-ranking aristocrats came from knight families. It made sense that this guy was one of them.

“I didn’t start anything,” I reminded him. “The nobles did. Makes sense that they suffered the consequences.”

Okay, to be fair, I was kind of downplaying my role in it, but still...

Roland ignored me. “This is the fifth incident in which an aristocrat who was promoted has been targeted and killed.”

“Fifth? This has happened five times already?”

“Yes. Each incident was fairly recent too.”

“We’ve got a serial killer on our hands is what you’re saying. How is the Kingdom going to handle a criminal like that running loose?”

Roland shrugged. “Beats me. Mylene would know more about it than I would.”

“And you claim to be this country’s king?”

“You think a king has say over everything that happens in his kingdom? How naive. More importantly, it’s awfully suspicious of you to be having a secret rendezvous with the lady Saint. I can’t imagine your fiancées would be pleased to hear about that.”

Great. So he saw me in the pub with Marie. The most infuriating part about Roland was how capable he was when the occasion *didn’t* call for it—or, at the very least, when it was inconvenient to me.

“Unlike you,” I quipped, “I’m not doing anything questionable.”

“That’s for your fiancées and the rest of the world to decide. Ah, but I have other affairs to attend to! You will have to excuse me. While we’re at it, brat, you’d better stay far away from Erica. I mean it. Approach her and I’ll have your head.” Roland drew his finger across his neck to emphasize his threat. Then he

scuttled away.

With the king out of sight, I looked to where Luxion bobbed in the air. He had been cloaked the whole time. “Erica?”

“Marie informed me of her. The villainous princess Erica Rapha Holfort is a new student this year. Mylene is her mother.”

I had bolted from the pub to investigate before getting to see her picture.

“The villainess of the third game, then. We can discuss her later. Right now, I’d rather focus on this murder incident. We’re not inside school grounds, so you should have no problems digging up information...right?” I glanced over my shoulder, back down the alleyway where the event had taken place. People were still gathered there.

“The Demonic Suit’s interference extends throughout the entire capital. It doesn’t seem to know our exact location, so it’s broadcasting a disruptive signal over a wide area. Infuriating, as I’m sure you agree.”

It was good news that the enemy hadn’t located us, but the bad news was that we had no idea where it was hiding either. Creating an area of interference encompassing the entire capital was a seriously sweet cheat skill.

“Wait, how are you still working? It’s kinda weird that you can maintain a link here when there’s interference across the whole city, isn’t it?”

I was referring to the fact that Luxion’s main body was a spaceship and this round robot body he inhabited right now was actually a remote terminal. If this Demonic Suit really was jamming him, it would only make sense for the link between his main body and remote terminal to be severed.

“This body was custom made. I prioritized the most secure link possible so that I would be able to provide you support on the ground. I also prepared a number of high-performance, dedicated relays as well.”

“Gotcha. Can’t you do that for your drones and stuff too?”

“Would we be in this predicament if I could? Consider it seriously.”

His sarcasm never failed to get on my nerves.

“Back to the matter at hand, do you think this serial killer incident has

anything to do with the Demonic Suit?”

“I can detect a presence that I believe to be the Demonic Suit. While I cannot say for certain whether it is the exact same unit responsible for the blanket interference throughout the city, I can confirm a Demonic Suit is involved, yes.”

“Perfect,” I grumbled.

An incredibly dangerous adversary had infiltrated the capital. We couldn’t move as freely as before now that we knew danger lurked both within and outside the school walls.

Lost in thought, I spotted a familiar face among the crowd of onlookers. He wasn’t wearing his school uniform this time. Like before, he turned on his heel and left the scene as soon as he caught my eye.

“What’s that guardian knight doing here?”

He had gone out of his way to leave the campus to come all the way out here, to this remote spot. I was more suspicious of his motives than ever. I shot Luxion a look, and, as though sensing exactly what was going through my head, he bobbed up and down in a pastiche of a nod.

“I will increase the number of independent drones I have tailing him.”

“Make sure you do. I want lots of eyes on him.”

In an old building located within the capital, a man in knightly garb with a bushy mustache headed down a staircase and into the basement. This man’s name was Gabino.

Gabino kept his shoulders rolled back and his chest puffed out in a show of confidence, but he was quite self-conscious about a scar on the right side of his forehead. He had grown out his hair in an attempt to hide the mark, but it still peeked through.

Gabino would nonchalantly dig out his beloved pocket watch to check the time at random periods, as if by habit. He had assisted the rebel army in the Alzer Republic during the coup attempt. Since Leon had ultimately thwarted the Holy Kingdom’s schemes, Gabino was sent here to Holfort Kingdom.

When Gabino stepped into the spacious albeit dimly lit basement hall, he paid his most reverent respects to those waiting for him.

“Ladies, my most humble apologies for keeping you waiting.”

Gabino was handsome in spite of his years. His smile significantly brightened the moods of the women in the room.

“You’re right on time, Lord Gabino. Although...a woman’s desire is for a man to come early, you know.”

“My apologies! I’m afraid I have done you ladies a disservice after all.”

Every wall of the vast hall where the women were gathered was festooned with the flags of the Ladies of the Forest. This group of primarily noblewomen was formed back when matriarchy was the law of the land in the Kingdom. The women were clad in threadbare red dresses, worn from continued use, and despite the changing of the times maintained the same dignified manner as they always had. Though they had once commanded beautiful male slaves, nowadays they depended upon the charity of their own children or other lower-ranking women within their organization. Their order had a hierarchy, after all. The wives of countryside barons dangled at the very bottom end.

The women lined up against the wall were tasked with looking after the leaders of the Ladies of the Forest. Zola stood among their number.

During the war with the Principality, Leon’s father Balcus had cut ties completely with Zola, at which point she had ceased to be an aristocrat at all. The Ladies of the Forest took her in when she had nowhere else to go. Alas, they had worked her to the bone as a maid. Unlike the high-ranking Ladies, Zola wore not a dress but the regular garb of a commoner.

Gabino had his subordinates carry in goods for these women who were eking out a living in this decrepit building’s basement. Several wooden crates were piled up full of alcohol, sweets, and beautiful dresses—all presents for the women here.

“My gifts to you, dear ladies,” said Gabino.

“Oh my, what a considerate man you are!”

The leaders of the organization were the first to leap on the crates and begin fussing with each other to claim the goods for themselves.

As Gabino watched, he said, “Pardon my curiosity, ladies, but...is there no possibility for you to reclaim the rights that were stolen from you?”

All of the leaders’ heads jerked up. Their expressions were stained with a deep hatred for the Kingdom that had abandoned them. An ominous atmosphere hung thick in the air, but Gabino’s smile never faltered.

The woman who acted as the chief representative of their organization paused to hold up one of the dresses to her body, trying to confirm whether or not it suited her. As she did so, she responded, “That would be difficult. We have already disposed of a number of detestable upstarts, but the Kingdom shows no signs of wavering. His Majesty remains unchanged, and that foreign - she-devil who curried so much favor with him has been left to make whatever political moves she sees fit.”

The “she-devil” in question was the main pillar of rule in Holfort Kingdom—Mylene. Gabino was no fan of hers either, although that came as little surprise. Mylene’s home country, the United Kingdom of Lepart, had long been locked in conflict with his own home country, the Holy Kingdom of Rachel. Mylene did an admirable job of sealing a strong alliance between Holfort Kingdom and Lepart, which was precisely why Gabino had informed the ladies that Mylene was responsible for dragging them down from their once favorable positions.

“She certainly is a nuisance,” Gabino agreed. “It doesn’t help that she’s inveigled Marquess Bartfort and is using him as her pawn. If only he weren’t in the picture, then none of you ladies would have been reduced to this.”

The words barely left his mouth before one of the women against the wall began to radiate intense hatred, her face twisted in a dark scowl.

“Hm? What is the matter, Miss Zola?”

“O-oh, it’s nothing, really.” Zola averted her gaze when Gabino addressed her.

The other women in the room turned their sharp gazes on Zola.

“The Scumbag Knight was brought up in your house, wasn’t he?”

“Things would be so much better if you’d reared him to be a decent person.”

“Utterly useless.”

They pelted Zola with insults, taking out their frustrations on her. She was nothing more than a punching bag to them—a way to unleash pent-up rage.

“Let’s all calm down,” Gabino said gently. “You can all return to the way things were as soon as we take care of the queen and the marquess. The Holy Kingdom of Rachel is willing to provide its support to that end.”

The representative beamed at Gabino. “The men of Rachel are true, respectable gentlemen. The men of Holfort are rather pathetic in comparison... What a lamentable state of affairs.”

Gabino took the representative’s hand in his and smiled. Her cheeks heated.

“A chance will most assuredly present itself. I only ask that you lend me your support when that time comes, ladies,” he said.

“Y-yes. But are you truly sure everything will go as planned?” The representative’s face clouded with concern.

“I am certain of it,” Gabino assured her confidently. “Besides, we have a powerful trump card on our side. We will not be beaten, even should we come to blows with the Scumbag Knight himself.”

All of the women in the room became restless now that Gabino had offered his word, anxious for this promised change.

The very least you women can do is make yourself useful to Rachel, Gabino thought. Your Kingdom will need to take heavy casualties to recompense us for going out of our way to drag out the Demonic Knight.

The moment Gabino left, the leaders of the organization set about admonishing Zola.

“Zola, you should be the one to atone for having raised such an unruly stepson. This is your misstep!”

“Y-yes, of course!” Zola could do nothing in the face of their intimidation but

lower her head submissively. Were she to strike back, the other women might throw her out, and she had nowhere else to go.

Zola, once part of the aristocracy, had fallen down the social ladder to stand as a mere commoner. Cast out and with no income of her own, she could no longer finance the lavish lifestyle to which she was accustomed, and her personal slave had immediately abandoned her. She was too ignorant of the world to know how to make it on her own. The Ladies of the Forest were her one hope of survival.

The representative stomped over to Zola and snatched a fistful of her hair, yanking her head up. “Your children are fulfilling their duties as assigned to them, aren’t they? They’d better be.”

“I promise they are! They’ll take care of everything. Rutart infiltrated the academy safely, and Merce has had no issues making contact with our target.”

“Good.”

The woman released Zola, sending her slumping to the floor. Memories of Leon’s detestable face materialized in her mind, and she seethed.

Why must I suffer like this? This is all that rotten brat’s fault. If he hadn’t gotten unnecessarily involved, none of this would’ve happened.

Other people saw Leon as the Hero of Holfort, but that was of little consequence to Zola or the other women. They were all convinced that the man who had climbed the political ladder and secured himself a title as marquess was the true source of their woes.

Patience, Zola, patience. I need only suffer this indignity a little while longer. Soon enough, we’ll be back to a lifestyle of luxury. And then I’ll make sure Balcus and his ilk are given the death sentence.

The only way Zola had endured this humiliation was by nursing a thirst for revenge toward House Bartfort. They would pay for all they had put her through.

Late that night, Roland made his way to a pleasant little bar where he soon

found himself enjoying alcohol in the company of a young woman.

“That’s right,” he said. “My wife is so fussy that my heart can’t find any reprieve.” He reached for the woman’s hand as he vented about Mylene, but she quickly moved away.

“Poor Mr. Leon! You certainly have it rough,” she responded in a singsong voice.

Roland was using Leon’s name as an alias while he had his fun with this woman.

“You’ve grown colder with me, Merce. It breaks my heart.”

“O-oh, I have? Er, but, a-a woman should remain steadfast and not give in too easily to a man’s flattery!” Merce panicked in the face of his feigned sadness and rattled off a placatory excuse.

A portly man with a tiny gray mustache approached the two. He pulled the hat down from his head and hesitantly said, “Mr. Rola—I mean, ahem, Leon—it’s about time you returned home.”

Roland heaved a sigh and lifted himself out of his chair. “Time flies when you’re enjoying yourself, and today was a real treat. When can you meet with me next, my dear?”

Merce smiled, relieved to be free of him. “My schedule is open a week from today.”

“All right, I’ll see you then. Ah, one moment... Permit me to stop by the bathroom before we leave.”

As soon as Roland left, Merce let out an exaggerated, throaty sigh. Then she glared daggers at the man who had intervened. “You should have come sooner.”

“He m-might’ve suspected something if I came any sooner—”

“Are you trying to defy me? Have you forgotten how much dirt we have on you? Fail to cooperate and we’ll expose your secrets. Your entire life will be over as you know it.”

“Anything but that! I beg you!”

Successfully threatened, the man had no choice but to follow Merce's every command.

Merce edged away from him and snatched the glass of alcohol from the table, draining it dry. With Roland gone, she launched into a tirade about him. "Pathetic, really. Does he expect to fool people with such an amateur disguise? And of all the fake names he could choose, he picks Leon? What a lowlife."

Sensing that she wanted him to agree, the man timidly nodded. His desire to comply overwhelmed his wariness about prying eyes in their midst. "Right, of course. Just, please...keep your voice down."

"I know, I know."

It wasn't long after she snapped her mouth shut that Roland returned from the bathroom. He was in chipper spirits as he looped an arm around Merce and tried to plant his mouth on her. "Sadly the time has come to say our farewells, Merce, so allow me to give you a kiss before I—"

Merce held up a hand, letting his lips crash against her palm instead of his intended mark. "Yes, yes. We'll enjoy some more time together soon, Mr. Leon."

"Aloof as always, I see. But all right, I'll try again next time."

Once he released her, she forced a smile on her face and left. Roland lingered behind to watch her depart. When her receding back was completely out of sight, he turned to the mustached man who'd interrupted their tryst. "Couldn't she stand to be a bit more friendly?"

The man scanned their surroundings to make sure no one was watching. His name was Fred; he and Roland had been acquainted for many years, and he served in the court as Roland's personal doctor. The two had stayed firm friends since their academy days.

"Your Majesty, you're playing with fire," he said.

"My good man, this is nothing but a bit of fun! No harm in that. Now then, off we go. I have another dalliance lined up for tonight...this one woman I'm after. With a little more pushing I'm sure I can finally win her affections."

“You’re going to fool around with more women? You never learn your lesson.”

Roland proceeded to drag Fred after him to a different establishment.

Chapter 3:

Reversal

UPON MY RETURN from the scene of the crime, I discovered Marie had more or less devoured all the dishes she had ordered at the pub. Her gluttony had reached heights that were unthinkable in our previous life. It kinda broke my heart.

“I’m impressed you managed to scarf all that down with that tiny body of yours,” I said.

Although it was a mystery where she managed to store it all. My comment also didn’t go down well; she didn’t seem pleased by how petite she was in her current incarnation.

“Keep it to yourself, jerk! Anyway, what was going on outside?”

“We’ll discuss that once we get back to the school. First, I’d like to confirm some things about the third game.”

“What? Didn’t we do that already?”

At this point, all we could rely on were Marie’s vague recollections. I hoped that by rehashing the topic over and over, it might jostle some previously forgotten memories loose. We reincarnated here a long time ago; even I forgot about some details of the first game since dying and waking up here, and I had played it to completion.

“Yup. Maybe the more we talk about it, the more you’ll manage to remember.”

Marie shook her head. “I’m not gonna remember anything besides what I’ve already told you. I only played the game to the midway point anyhow, y’know? I know the gist of what happens from the walkthrough I looked up on the web, but you can forget about the specifics.”

She’d reportedly used a walkthrough website to guide her through the choices in the game only to grow sick of the story midway through and quit. Her

knowledge was limited as a result, but it was better than nothing at all.

“I get that, but humor me.”

After a long pause, she started, “Our protagonist, Mia, leaves the Empire for the Kingdom so she can study abroad at the academy. The story centers around her daily school life. She becomes acquainted with a number of super dreamy guys, like you’d expect. She also gets thwarted by the villainous princess during the early part of the story.”

“The trope evolved from having a noble lady as its villainess to a princess, I see.” I reached the photo of her on the table. Her black hair framed her face in soft, gentle waves. Her breasts were a healthy size, especially for her small and lithe frame. Her expression was warm and inviting, but she allegedly had a terrible personality.

“She’s the absolute worst,” Marie confirmed. “Y’know those conniving women, the ones who put on a convincing mask to hide how they’re secretly rotten to the core? She’s a prime example. The story tells it like she had a weak constitution as a kid, but I’m calling bull. Her personality reeks, and she’s constantly sneaking around to do nasty stuff behind other people’s backs. She seriously pisses me off.”

“What, so you hate her because she’s just like you?” I snickered.

Marie launched her wooden spoon at me, and it hit me square in the forehead. Her glare was so fierce that my mouth snapped shut; she didn’t continue her retelling until she was satisfied I wasn’t going to disparage her further.

“A battle event with the Principality takes place during their first year at the academy, and you actually get to glimpse the inside story for this one.”

“What does that mean?”

“Like, you can see what’s happening behind the scenes of the battle? Something like that. Anyhow, it’s an opportunity for the protagonist to score some more affection points with Prince Jake and the other love interests, but any event involving the Principality is kinda out of the question so it’s pretty much moot.”

Of course it was. We had already bested the Principality—the final boss of the game. The one part of all this I could take relief in was that we'd warded off any danger to the Kingdom well in advance.

"Anyway, long story short, the events of their first year draw to a close and they move on to their second year. That's when Hertrauda transfers into the academy. The protagonist has some interactions with her, and we discover as the player that she's in a pretty rough spot, being the princess of the country that lost the war. That part's not super relevant to us, since she's not here anymore."

In exchange for her life, Hertrauda had used the Magic Flute to summon the two Guardians—the final bosses of the game, according to other players. Hearing about her involvement in the third installment of the game was a grim reminder of how significantly we'd changed the course of this world's history.

"Erica continues to bully Mia as usual until about midway through her second year, when our heroine is called back to the Empire. We find out there that the emperor, who has taken ill and can't leave his bed, is actually Mia's father."

Luxion interrupted, "Another protagonist with an impressive pedigree? This seems to be a running theme, given we saw the same trope already with Olivia and Noelle."

Marie nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I guess it's a pretty popular trope. Anyway, Mia is officially recognized as an imperial princess, and her country dispatches warships to act as an armed escort during her return. Erica can't bully Mia anymore, so she turns her sights on Hertrauda instead."

"The Holy Magic Empire wields more power than even Holfort does," said Luxion, "so it stands to reason that this Erica couldn't continue to threaten its princess. It would be a bad move diplomatically were she to keep that up."

In my opinion, the best diplomatic decision would be not to bully anyone at all, but apparently a villainous princess like Erica couldn't help herself. Given my experiences with both Angie and Miss Louise, I couldn't say for certain whether Erica was a true villainess or not. For now, I would rather account for the possibility that she wasn't a bad person deep down.

"Great, and what happens after the midway point in the game?" I asked.

“There’s an event where Erica offends Hertrude. Hertrauda loses her temper and calls in the Principality’s fleet, leading to a full-scale conflict. Monsters crop up from the air and the sea. With the help of Jake and the others, Mia and her own forces successfully put down the sea boss. The Saint, Olivia, takes out the sky boss. When the dust clears, Erica’s evildoing is exposed. She meets a nasty end after that.”

The explanation was noticeably vaguer this time around because Marie hadn’t played this part of the game for herself.

“And Hering, the guardian knight, never makes an appearance? No random cameo at the end? You’re sure he isn’t some kind of hidden character or anything?”

Hering wasn’t part of the original scenario, so his presence here on the study-abroad program was unexpected for everyone involved. That he was a guardian knight tasked with protecting raised some serious alarms as well.

“Nope,” Marie confirmed. “He’s not a secret character or anything. I never heard any talk about a guardian knight, at least.”

She seemed to know very little about the love interests of this game, which made me a bit wary...but she was so insistent that he wasn’t part of the original scenario that I figured she was probably right.

“We’ll do some sneaking around and look into this whole guardian knight business, but that can come later. What matters now is how things will play out from here.” I lifted up the photograph of Erica, holding it at eye level. My gaze shifted between it and Marie sitting across from me. I got an eerie sense that the two of them looked similar, but I couldn’t explain why. Their hair, expressions, and even their physiques were totally different.

Marie seemed to interpret my scrutinizing gaze as an attempt to mock her. Her cheeks puffed out and her fingers squeezed tightly around a fork, which she held up as if she was ready to hurl it at me at any given second. I decided the prudent choice would be to keep my mouth shut.

The day after the opening ceremony arrived, and although classes began for

the new students, most of them consisted of going over the syllabus for each course. The actual coursework wouldn't start until a bit later in the term.

Mia, the new exchange student from the Empire, nervously found her seat in one of the classrooms and plopped down. She was an outsider here; few students bothered to speak to her at all. Most merely gazed at her from afar.

Uuurgh, this is so stressful.

Every day in this unfamiliar environment had been a great source of anxiety, but thankfully Mia had a lone acquaintance amid the sea of unfamiliar classmates.

A tall, handsome boy walked into the classroom after her, followed by the gazes of various students. Finn was another exchange student, like Mia—and he had volunteered to act as her guardian knight. Both of them came from a foreign land, but the other students tended to look at Finn differently. More favorably. His fellow male students regarded him with envy, while half of the female students ogled him with interest.

Her popular, respectable knight took a seat beside her. “The Kingdom is far too eager to indulge in aristocratic opulence. The halls in this academy are better suited to a palace. It would easily pass for one, back in the Empire.”

“Sir Knight,” Mia addressed him with some trepidation, “It’s, um, probably not a terribly good idea to go badmouthing the school like that.” Her lack of self-assurance came from her understanding of their relative statuses: She was a mere commoner. Ordinarily, a knight like Finn would never serve as her protector like this.

Far from being offended that she’d spoken out of line, Finn smiled. “Apologies for the discourtesy, my princess. I did not intend to badmouth this institution. It was a slightly sarcastic comment, nothing more.”

“I-I don’t think sarcasm is good either,” Mia responded, blushing.

“My princess, you ask so much of me. But I shall adhere to your word...as your guardian knight.” It wasn’t until Finn chuckled that Mia realized he was teasing her. Her cheeks flushed an even deeper shade as she ducked her face away.

“You’re making fun of me, aren’t you? That’s mean of you, Sir Knight.”

“I was only joking. Besides, you need not be on edge around me. I wish you would act more relaxed, in fact.”

“N-no, I couldn’t possibly... I needn’t remind you, I’m sure, but back in the Empire, you—” Mia started to explain that she knew precisely how incredible of a knight he was, and so she could *never* impose upon him. Before the words could leave her mouth, their conversation was interrupted by a pair of rowdy voices.

“I am truly sorry, Miss Finley!”

A female student stormed in to the room with a male student hot on her heels, apologizing profusely and drawing the immediate attention of the rest of their classmates.

Finley, the recipient of his pleas, looked thoroughly fed up. “Mr. Oscar, you don’t need to keep apologizing. My one wish is that you please not mistake me for my brother from now on. That was really embarrassing.”

“I am sorry. I never dreamed that when he said Bartfort, he meant your brother instead of you.”

“It’s not my place to tell you this, I know, but you really should use your brain a little more. From what His Highness said, I assure you that any other person would have brought my brother to see him and not me.”

“I-I suppose you have a point. People do say that I should, er, use my brain more. I am trying, I promise.”

Finley looked impassively on as Oscar prostrated himself. Mia snuck a glance in their direction, intrigued by what this whole kerfuffle was about. She didn’t - observe them for long before turning her gaze back to Finn, wondering what he made of it all. He wore a solemn expression, his eyes pinned on Finley.

“Miss Finley, hm? I do believe she is Marquess Bartfort’s younger sister,” he said.

“I’ve heard of him too,” Mia said eagerly. “The rumors reach all the way to the Empire. I hear he’s a hero that destroyed an extremely powerful nation from the inside, right? And people often call him by another name... What was it? Sir Scumbag?”

She was correct that whispers of Leon had traveled all the way to the Empire but failed to relay them correctly. Finn seemed a little perturbed at her lack of knowledge, but there was a faint curl at the edge of his lips suggested he found her ignorance compelling.

“The marquess’s other name is Scumbag Knight.”

“Oh, was that it? That name sounds kinda awesome if you ask me. Like, you hear it and imagine someone super scary.”

“I suppose.” Any trace of humor disappeared from Finn’s face. He turned his gaze to the spot in the classroom where people were clamoring around one of their classmates—the first princess of Holfort. Today, much like during the opening ceremony, she was surrounded by a horde of female followers.

Mia followed his gaze. When she identified who he was looking at, her eyes sparkled with admiration. “Oh, it’s Princess Erica. She always looks so stunning.”

“I suppose.”

Mia turned sullen at his perfunctory reply. Her knight had so reverently called her his princess moments before, but his eyes had strayed and fixed to another woman. It bothered her.

“So, Sir Knight, I guess you prefer true princesses, huh?”

The moment the question left her lips, Mia realized it was an unfair thing to ask. She dropped her gaze, terrified of how he might reply.

“You are the only princess for me.”

It was a cringeworthy platitude, but Mia was delighted to hear it. Even so, *she* thought Erica was gorgeous.

Princesses really are beautiful.

Erica’s black hair had a brilliant sheen to it, and the way she conducted herself spoke of a maturity far beyond her years. These two things made her stand out among her peers.

After a while of ogling, Erica seemed to take notice of Mia’s gaze. She flashed a smile in Mia’s direction, so Mia awkwardly did the same. She was over the moon that the princess would take notice of her. As soon as their brief

interaction ended, she whipped around to face Finn.

“Sir Knight, did you see that?! Um...Sir Knight?”

At some point, his smile had evaporated, leaving his face devoid of any emotion.



After school, I invited a couple of friends back to my dorm room. Daniel and Raymond were once my comrades-in-arms, back when us poor, backwater barony boys formed a clique at school. They wanted to talk to me about something, so I brought them along.

“Man, Leon, you’ve really hit it big now, haven’t you?” Daniel commented as he took a seat at the large table inside, awed by the state of my accommodations. One look at this place was all it took to comprehend the kind of favorable treatment the academy had afforded me.

Both of them were at a bit of a loss now that I’d soared up to the upper echelons. They clearly saw me as someone far beyond their reach. Raymond seemed particularly self-conscious about it.

“Guess we should be calling you Lord Leon by this point. Lumping you in the same group as us might be taken as an insult.”

It was a bit disheartening for my friends to put such distance between us. Especially since I hadn’t changed at all since I first began attending—wait, scratch that. It’d be pretty awful if I hadn’t matured at *all* over the past three years.

“Don’t sweat it,” I said. “I’m dirt poor as ever even with my impressive title. No territory or income, remember?”

“Come off it. You’re engaged to a duke’s daughter! That alone means you’re winning at life,” Daniel said with a shrug. “Anyhow, it’s a relief to see you’re the same old Leon. It’d be a real bummer if you suddenly claimed you were too good for us.”

He and Raymond smiled with relief. Raymond adjusted the position of his glasses on his nose. “Yeah, we couldn’t come to you for advice then... That’d suck.”

I offered each of them a cup of tea before I asked, “So what do you guys want advice about anyway? I’m happy to help, so long as it’s not about money.”

I could offer *some* help when it came to financial matters, but I knew from my previous life that bringing money issues into your friendships was a bad idea. I would step in if they were at their wits’ end, but otherwise? Nuh uh.

Fortunately, money problems didn't appear to be on the table. What a pleasure it was to have two respectable friends.

Daniel's expression turned solemn as he explained, "To be completely honest, way more women have been approaching us this year than ever before."

"Are you guys taking a dig at me for all the misery I went through in my first year here? If this is a humblebrag, you can both get out." I was ready to chase away both of these chumps, but a panicked Raymond hurried to provide the finer details.

"H-hold on! We're seriously in agony over this. I mean, sure, it was a real ego boost at first; we may as well have been invisible to girls in the past, and now all of a sudden they were desperate to get in our good books. It felt nice!"

Raymond seemed genuine enough that I was inclined to hear them out. No one could claim to be a perfect saint, after all. I might have felt the same way in their position. I couldn't blame them for thinking, *Serves you girls right!*

The two of them had come back to reality quickly enough.

Daniel stared down at his lap. "Seeing the girls clamor for our attention reminded me of how it was for us back in our first year. It's heartbreaking. Treating them as coldly as they did to me, even as a joke, just feels scummy. With that in mind, I don't really feel like taking them up on their invitations for tea either."

During our first year at the academy, the boys had been the ones pleading for girls to attend their tea parties. Now our roles had reversed. I sipped my tea, mystified by how quickly the tables had turned.

"But see, because of what happened back then, we know what these girls are really like," Raymond said. He was holding his head in his hands. "It's obvious they're just putting on a show. There's no way we can actually date any of them."

My last year was spent studying abroad, so I wasn't abreast of the latest goings on. I had to rely on my friends' accounts of the dramatic shift in the academy's atmosphere.

"How are the other groups doing?" I asked.

They'd filled me in on how the poor sons of backwater baronies were faring, but I didn't know anything about the other groups at the school. There were many rich or high-ranking boys. I wanted to know what it was like for them.

Daniel pulled a face. "It's absolutely terrible. You made the right choice, studying abroad. It's pandemonium, to be honest; everyone everywhere is breaking off their engagements."

Yeah, that sounded like purgatorial chaos, all right.

"Most of the guys in other groups were already engaged," Raymond said, continuing where Daniel left off. He never looked up from his lap. "No one had any urgent need to get married, so most guys dumped their fiancées. It was pure mayhem, brutal to watch. Every single day new girls would end up in floods of tears."

Daniel pressed a hand over his stomach. "So many couples fought, and then there were merciless breakups. The carnage... It was awful... I could barely stomach it."

My own morbid curiosity made me wish I'd seen it for myself, but my two friends' discomfort in retelling the tale made it plain I'd been lucky to avoid it.

"So most of the engagements were called off, huh? Wait a sec! What happened to Milly and Jessica?! If their partners broke it off with them, you two oughta make your move!"

In the midst of the discussion I recalled the names of two women who were practically thought of as goddesses in our first year at school. Most of the female student body was cruel to those of us who came from poor aristocratic families, but those two were kind and congenial. When the two of them got engaged, most of the guys congratulated them through streaming tears. I was among them. Well, I hadn't cried, but I did hope for the best for them. They were really nice girls.

My words seemed to trigger Raymond and Daniel's memories well. Their expressions turned hard.

"Milly and Jessica's fiancés absolutely refused to break things off. Tons of dudes at the school had the same idea you did—to try to make a move on the

girls, assuming they'd be available and heartbroken like the rest. We found out the guys with them weren't willing to yield."

"A whole group of us cornered them and strung them up to try to intimidate them into giving the girls up."

That sounded...extreme. I was already picturing how well that must have gone, but I took another sip of tea and asked anyway. "Let me guess. It didn't work?"

Daniel slammed his fists on the table. "Those dopes swore up and down that they wouldn't annul their engagements! Said that the girls were too precious, that they'd been there to support them from their first year at the school, so they would protect them to the very end! Bad enough that those jerks are handsome, they have to be gentleman at their core too!"

Aha. The two rich boys who were engaged to the girls stood their ground, it turned out. I didn't blame them; I'd do the same. We'd all seen how well the two girls got along with their future grooms after their engagement, and no one was surprised. Unlike the rest of the rest of their two-faced peers, Milly and Jessica were sincerely good people at heart. Why would their boyfriends break up with them? They'd lose everything and be forced back into the dating pool to search for a new girl.

Raymond removed his glasses to wipe his tears. "As long as they're both happy, that's good enough for me."

Not exactly convincing after you threatened the boys they're engaged to, I thought. I agreed with him, nonetheless. It was a relief to know Milly and Jessica were happy with their partners.

"So after all that social upheaval, some girls are being treated badly...but others are doing pretty well for themselves. Seems things are divided into one extreme or the other."

Dire as the situation was, some girls had found happiness for themselves. One's attitude had an impact on how they were treated, apparently. As for the girls whose partners had broken things off...well. *Good luck out there, ladies.*

Daniel eyed me enviously. "Must be nice. You bagged yourself a duke's

daughter as a fiancée *and* the scholarship student. You even got engaged to the Republic's princess!"

Since I already had Angie, Livia, and Noelle, I was in the unenviable position of not having to care one bit about marriage. Although, thinking on it a little more, maybe I wasn't as free from trouble as I thought. The real trouble might be looming just over the horizon.

"Now it's impossible for us to judge which girl would be right for us," Raymond went on. The same flames of jealousy burned in his eyes as he looked at me. "So here we are, hoping you can come up with some sort of solution."

"You want me to solve it? I spent the past year abroad! I know way less about the social dynamics here than you guys." A light bulb suddenly lit up in my mind. "Hey, speaking of... Get this. When I was attending school in the Republic, the girls there treated me like I was a true gentleman. Me! The kind of behavior that passes for normal over here is super popular with the ladies there."

Daniel and Raymond were so incensed by my boasting that veins protruded from their foreheads. They smiled at me with barely concealed animosity.

"Oh yeah? That must've been nice."

"You're saying that while we were suffering here, you were having the time of your life abroad, huh?"

My ego feasted upon their envy. I was riding high. "Yep! Ah, a youth well spent has such a pleasant taste to savor. Too bad you guys didn't decide to study abroad like I did," I jeered.

They lunged at me.

"Bastard!"

"I *knew* you hadn't changed at all! You have no idea how much crap we're dealing with!"

I was soon in a submission hold, squeaking, "I give! You win!"

While the three of us were horsing around, a knock came upon the door.

The sun was beginning to set when I left my room. Our unexpected visitor turned out to be Noelle, who had come to fetch me. She was currently gripping my hand tightly, yanking me along as she hurried to our destination. Daniel and Raymond trailed behind us.

“Come on, pick up the pace!” she barked at me.

“Y’know, when you showed up out of nowhere I was pretty shocked. What is it *this* time, I thought. But...this is just a fight, right?”

“Technically, I guess? I don’t know much about how things work in the Kingdom, but it didn’t look good.”

Yep. I was being unceremoniously dragged from my room to deal with a fight on campus. If this had been a squabble between two girls or two boys, Noelle wouldn’t have bothered to involve me—but this fight was between a girl and a boy. Such a stand-off would never have occurred amid the academy’s previous hierarchy at the academy, but things were much different now.

“I don’t think I’ll be much of a mediator even if I go,” I protested. I wasn’t eager to get myself tangled up in someone else’s problems. “I don’t even know what they’re fighting about!”

“Don’t you get it, Leon?” Daniel piped up behind me. “Things have changed. This isn’t the same academy you remember from first year.”

“How is it different?” I asked, glancing over my shoulder back at him.

Raymond answered, “Men are the top dogs on campus now, remember? The second-years can be pretty annoying because of it, but the newer students are bound to be way more insufferable.”

“In what way?”

“Imagine our first year here. Now flip the gender roles.”

As we approached the scene of this whole kerfuffle, the echo of loud voices grew more pronounced. Onlookers had formed a circle around two new students, a boy and a girl, each of whom were glowering at the other. A teacher in their midst was desperately trying to smooth things over, but their pleas fell on deaf ears. I also spotted Angie in the midst with Livia standing close behind

her. Her lips were drawn into a tight line, brow furrowed as she made her own attempt to intervene.

“How long do you two intend to continue bickering like this? Whatever the issue is, it’s not worth drawing all this attention.”

Noelle dragged me through the crowd, pushing people aside on her journey to the center.

“Do you mean to demand that I absolve him of his wrongdoings?” questioned the female student. “I have committed no transgressions here. This man is the one who sauntered after us and jostled my friend, throwing her to the ground.”

Another female student cowered behind the girl using all those big, intelligent words. This had to be the friend in question; she had sustained some minor scrapes when she fell. Right now, she hissed, “It’s fine, let it go.”

The male student had a vile smile plastered on his face. “It’s your fault for dragging your feet and walking so slow. Girls ought to move aside and let men pass. That’s only common sense, right?”

“The *audacity!*”

“Nasty little cow. Keep up that attitude, and no one’s going to want to take you for a bride.”

The girl sucked in a shocked breath. She recovered to snap, “Insult me all you like, but I refuse to capitulate to such intimidation!” Her bold declaration sounded impressive, but she was no longer looking the boy in the eyes.

“Whoa, this is awful,” I said, finally realizing what Raymond meant. This sort of exchange would have been unthinkable in the past. It left a sour taste in my mouth.

Livia noticed my presence and tugged on Angie’s arm to get her attention. As soon as Angie spotted me, she breathed a long sigh of relief, as if she had been waiting for me to get here.

I headed over to the two of them, intending to inquire about the circumstances of this whole mess, but the crowd around us instantly erupted in whispers.

“That’s Leon, the third-year.”

“It’s the marquess in the flesh.”

“He looks punier than I thought.”

Okay, who’s the wise guy who called me puny? I was nothing if not petty. I’d have Luxion confirm the person’s identity later so I could pay them back for that insult.

Anyway, it was really uncomfortable being the center of attention like this. I had stood out (and not in a good way) during my first year here, but the way people treated me now was...well, gross, for lack of a better word.

“I brought him,” Noelle said as she offered me to Angie.

“You certainly took your time! I hate to ask this, Leon, but I need you to mediate,” said Angie.

I wasn’t about to refuse her request—I was eager to help out, if anything. I wasn’t exactly a professional at this whole mediation thing, though, so without any genius ideas to go off of, I glanced between the two would-be fighters.

“So, uh...” I began, which immediately prompted the female student to take a retreating step back.

“Eep!”

I hadn’t meant to make her squeak in terror like that. I wasn’t so sure I was cut out for this. I looked back at the male student to see his face had lit up.

“You’re Leon, right? A third-year? I’m Earl Knowles’s fifth son, Marco, and boy, have I heard lots of rumors about you! My older brother talked you up a ton, said you’re the hero who abolished the corrupt customs that had taken root in the school.”

“Yeah, that’s great and all,” I said dismissively, “but what’re you guys doing standing here and staring each other down? From what I just heard, you strolled up behind these girls and shoved one of them. Did you have any reason to do that?”

Though I didn’t have much hope for a reasonable answer, the answer I received was more ghastly than I could have imagined.

“Nope. They seemed to be having fun chatting with each other and it pissed me off, so I shoved her.”

“...Sorry?”

“My status is above theirs! I didn’t like that they were walking in front of me like that. Impertinent girls like these need to be taught a lesson, see.”

I was so flabbergasted, so sure I had to be mishearing him, that I turned my gaze back to Angie. She must have sensed my unspoken disbelief because she put her hands on her hips and dropped her gaze, similarly disgusted.

“He’s an ignorant fool,” she said.

Not so long ago, I had held the belief that all nobles of rank or higher were reasonable, decent people on the whole, unlike many of the aristocrats beneath them who tended to be sleazy and cruel. This male student in front of me was an apparent exception to that rule.

Marco was so convinced that I would take his side in this altercation that he turned his attention back to the female student and pointed a finger at her. “Marquess Bartfort is here to back me up now. I’ll see that you and your little friend are promptly expelled!”

I couldn’t begin to fathom what Marco was thinking. I didn’t have that kind of authority, nor would I be willing to use it to his advantage if I did. Marco was blatantly in the wrong here. The female student didn’t see it that way. She turned white as a sheet, her knees practically knocking together with how much her legs were shaking. The doom and gloom atmosphere around her indicated that she genuinely thought everything was over—that she was as good as expelled.

Again, I don’t have that kinda authority.

“Nope, you’re pretty clearly in the wrong here,” I said without much further contemplation. “Hurry up and apologize to her.”

Marco’s jaw dropped in disbelief. “What?”

“You heard me. Apologize to her. You walked up behind them and shoved that one girl, right? What were you thinking?”

Marco's cheeks flared bright red. Spittle flew everywhere as he protested, "Quit joking around! Why should I have to apologize to *her*? I'm the son of an earl!"

"Good for you, buddy. You do realize that Angie, who was trying to mediate here, is from a ducal house, right? Why not just own up to your mistake? Go on, get on with it. The sun's already set."

A curtain of darkness had fallen across the sky.

Our new term only just started. Why do I have to deal with so many morons?

Marco's entire body vibrated with unrestrained rage. He lunged for me, fist raised, but one of his classmates—a guy in his posse, to be specific—dove in to stop him in time.

"Master Marco, please remember who you're dealing with here! You could easily lose your life." After urging Marco, the follower turned to me. "W-we're sorry. Really, really sorry. Please have mercy!"

Back to his senses at last, Marco trembled as he said, "My humblest apologies. I-I will make sure to have money prepared for you immediately, so please, all I ask is that you spare my life. I'll plead with my family to pay you as much as we can afford."

"You don't gotta apologize to *me*," I said. What had him so spooked?

As if in response to my confusion, the crowd began to murmur disparaging remarks. I was curious about how everyone else thought of me, same as any other guy, but what I was hearing made my stomach turn.

"Oh boy, now he's done it."

"He pissed off the marquess. His life is over."

"Looks like he's gonna be the one expelled."

Angie noticed my discomfort at all the attention and cut in. "You were a huge help, Leon. I'll take care of it from here. Go on back to your room and I'll fill you in on the particulars later."

"R-right..."

Later that night, Angie came by to pay me a visit. I welcomed her in and prepared us some drinks. Angie settled into a chair and set about putting the earlier incident in more context for me.

“A hero is not only feared by his foes but by his comrades as well,” she explained as she sipped on the mug of tea I provided. “Your influence is much greater than you realize. My authority as a duke’s daughter is nothing to sniff at, but yours? You’re a marquess *and* hero to the realm. You saw how those students reacted to you, right? People respect and fear you far more than they do me.”

“Sure, but I’m just a fake who accomplished those things by borrowing Luxion’s power,” I reminded her, trying to downplay the seriousness of the situation.

Angie smiled sadly.

“For being the fifth son of an earl’s house, that boy was quite ignorant about the workings of high society,” Luxion commented. “I find it unusual that any aristocrat would rebuff the arbitration attempts of a duke’s daughter. Or has Angelica’s authority fallen so far that he can do so with impunity?”

It didn’t matter whether that was true or not. I bristled at Luxion’s phrasing.

“Don’t put it like that,” I scolded him. “He looked like a serious moron to me. I bet he’s ignorant of how things work, that’s all.”

“In any case, I fear he is no exception to the rule. Similar such ‘morons,’ to borrow your parlance, are becoming ever more prevalent at the academy.”

“Seriously?”

I tore my gaze from Luxion to glance at Angie.

“There is a gender imbalance within the aristocratic population. You know that, don’t you? With so few men, it’s become increasingly difficult for women to marry. Society has shifted to place men in a more favorable position and now some of the male students are on power trips. Things weren’t this dire last year, but we can expect a steady stream of boys like him to enroll from this year

onward.”

“Man,” I groaned, “and I thought anyone from an earl house or higher had a decent head on their shoulders.”

“Marco is the fifth son of his house,” Angie reminded me. “I have heard the Earl Knowles’s heir is a good, upright man and that his other sons—from the second oldest to the forth oldest—are exceptional as well.”

“Ah, yes,” Luxion said. He seemed to understand what she was hinting at. “In other words, their house already has plenty of competent spares should the current heir pass, meaning the fifth son is not even in the running to inherit the house. Naturally, they have not spared a drop of effort toward his education.”

Angie nodded. “He was probably spoiled rotten as the youngest son, so it makes sense for him to be petulant and entitled. It’s unfortunate he couldn’t measure up to the rest of his brothers.”

Thanks to Angie and how well versed she was on aristocratic society, I had a clearer picture of how this kid had ended up this way. His family’s wealth and his own ignorance had landed him in this mess. Thinking back on the whole ordeal, I found his attitude reprehensible as ever.

“Would sure be nice if he’d open his eyes and see reason. He’s gotta be crazy to think I can hand out orders and get people expelled at the drop of a hat,” I grumbled.

“Angelica,” Luxion said, “were Master to use his authority, could he feasibly have that female student expelled from the academy?”

Why bother clarifying such a thing? I had no idea, but I was certain the answer was no.

Angie rested her cup on the table and contemplated the question, one hand curled daintily to her chin. “It would be impossible for him to accomplish through official paperwork, but Leon *could* pull some strings considering how highly regarded he is right now. That girl’s father is a mere viscount. So yes, if Leon really wanted, he could have her expelled.”

My whole body froze.

“No, that’s not possible. Master is the school’s headmaster now. He would never permit it,” I insisted.

My master was a perfect gentleman. I took pride in it. It was inconceivable to think he would ever permit a female student to be driven from the halls of the school on nothing but a flimsy pretense.

“You’re being naive.” Angie shook her head at me. “The level of trust the headmaster has with you is incomparable to a fresh first year. If you fabricated some decent evidence to use as an excuse and demanded he drive her out, he would oblige you. I’m sure of it.”

“I could never abuse Master’s trust like that!”

Angie pulled a face. “It’s fortunate that the headmaster is a man and not a woman... I suspect you would have thrown us aside to be with him.” Her tone was difficult to read; she sounded irritated and yet simultaneously relieved.

“No, you’ve got it all wrong. Master’s gender is irrelevant. I fell for the tea he brews!” I said those words to alleviate her fears, but her gaze turned even more hostile instead.

“Fine. We’ll leave at that then.”

“Wh-why are you angry?” I shot a glance at Luxion, hoping for some backup, but he moved his lens from side to side.

“Given your unsavory track record in romance, Master, it’s little wonder why you haven’t earned her trust. Why not spend less time on tea and more time trying to understand a woman’s heart?”

Can someone please explain to me why I’m being lectured on women’s hearts by a freakin’ AI?

Angie sighed gently and turned her gaze back to me. “Leon, you need to understand. Here in the Kingdom you hold much greater sway than you seem to realize. You are aware that Rachel has placed a bounty on your head, correct? A reward as big as 5 million dia is practically unheard of. Rachel views you as an enemy of the state.”

I clicked my tongue. “Wonderful, isn’t it? And after I went out of my way to

make sure there were as few casualties as possible.”

“I adore your kindness, you know that. But there are many out there who interpret it as a humiliation tactic.” She paused. “At any rate, this is a wretched situation to find ourselves in. Other than the roles being reversed, things are no different from before.”

She was right. The oppression at the academy hadn’t changed, only which gender was perpetrating it. One might argue it had gotten worse.

“Personally, I find this outcome to be within expected parameters,” Luxion said.

Apparently he’d foreseen this reversal and the emergence of pigheaded boys like Marco when we overthrew the previous social order. His smugness pissed me off.

“You should’ve said something if you saw this coming.”

“You never requested my input,” he quipped without missing a beat.

Well, dang. I was at a loss for words.

Angie’s lips, taut as a bowstring this entire time, broke into a smile at last. Our squabbling was good for something, apparently.

“Seeing you squabble like that gives me peace of mind. At least that boy ought to have cooled his head after you covered for that female student.”

I doubted what I had said was going to solve anything, myself. The problems plaguing this school were more deep-seated and severe than I’d anticipated.

Same as it ever was, huh?

Chapter 4: Investigation

TIME PASSED. The new students were growing accustomed to their school life, Finley among them. On one of her days off, Finley, urged by a letter from her family, made her way to the floating island above the city where a capital's harbor was stationed. As she waited at the appointed meeting spot, she unfolded the aforementioned correspondence, penned by her older sister Jenna.

I'm on my way to the capital for a little errand, and I trust you to be there to greet me when I arrive, the letter said.

Finley parked herself on a nearby bench and gave a sigh that echoed through her whole body. "Why do I have to spend one of my few precious days off to wait for her?"

Displeasure at her sister's sudden demand aside, Finley was delighted to be able to see Jenna again so soon. Although Finley had adapted to her life at the academy, her thoughts wandered back home more and more often. She would never admit it, but she was suffering a minor bout of homesickness.

Jenna came strolling down the gangway of one of the airships that had flown in, followed closely by Kyle. The half-elf was hauling enough luggage for two people.

"It's been so long since I last saw the capital!" Jenna said, throwing her arms open wide as she soaked it in.

Kyle sneered. "We're here for a reason, don't forget."

"I haven't forgotten!"

Jenna waved excitedly when she spotted Finley, who lifted herself from the bench and returned the gesture, albeit with a more restrained wave. She soon noticed the stares from those around her.

Urgh, they're such eyesores, Finley thought.

People weren't staring at her. They were staring at Jenna. The system wherein women could employ personal servants had been almost entirely abolished; Kyle's presence was peculiar. Some women secretly retained demi-human slaves, but barely anyone was gauche enough to parade them about in public. Jenna stuck out like a sore thumb.

If Jenna had noticed the stares she ignored them, instead barreling her way over to Finley so she could throw her arms around her younger sister. "I missed you, Finley!"

"Get off. I'm surprised that Mother agreed to let you come to the capital at all."

"I've been working like a dog this past month so she would! She's surprisingly easy to satisfy."

Finley frowned. "Don't get too carried away. You'll fall flat on your face."

"Now that would be a tragedy! But anyway, isn't about time for tea party season? Have any guys invited you?" Jenna grinned and nudged Finley with her elbow. She probably meant to tease her, but Finley shrugged with a blasé expression.

"Things are different than when you were in school. There are tea parties in May, sure, but romance isn't even in the picture. It's just drinking tea with some boys."

"What, seriously?"

"In fact, they're telling us girls that we need to host tea parties too. I plan to have Leon help me out."

"Leon's pretty particular about his tea," Jenna agreed. "Not that it's all that impressive. He gets cocky about the stupidest things. That dirtbag has such a garbage personality."

"For real! He's been so annoying, telling me I'd better follow curfew no matter what. He's spent the whole month being a pain in the butt."

As Jenna took in what Finley said, it struck her how different things were now compared to when she was in school. It came as a shock.

“Everything sure has changed. I heard the current headmaster was our former etiquette professor... I guess he kept up the tradition of tea parties, but now the girls are inviting the guys? I don’t get it.”

“It doesn’t have to be guys. We can invite friends too. They just want us to hold the parties.”

“That’s even stranger. Why host a tea party if not to meet a potential future partner? Sounds like a waste of time.”

Kyle had listened quietly to their conversation until now, but his eagerness to get a move on won out. “I couldn’t care less about who is inviting who to tea parties. Ha... I wonder if my mistress and the others are holding up all right.”

“They’re always making a scene at school, but they’re doing fine,” Finley said.

“Making a scene is par for the course with them. Still, I’m relieved to hear it.”

Nicks began descending the gangway, leading Dorothea along by the hand. Finley gaped at the sight of them—without missing a beat, she swiveled around to face Jenna. “What are *those* two doing here?”

“They came along to do some shopping.”

Finley realized on further inspection that Jenna and the others had arrived on House Bartfort’s largest battleship.

“Been a while,” Nicks said as he approached. “You seem to be doing well! It’s good to see. Tell me, Leon hasn’t caused any trouble yet, has he?”

An unsurprisingly typical question for anyone in Leon’s family to ask—rather than inquire about his well-being, they were in the habit instead of asking whether or not he’d gotten himself into another mess.

“He’s behaving himself for the most part...aside from snooping around in the background and stuff. I’ve had a relatively peaceful school life so far because of him,” Finley answered.

Being Leon’s younger sister was enough to dissuade most people from trying anything funny. She was grateful to him for that.

“I have been approached by some weird people, though.”

“Weird?” Nicks echoed, tilting his head in confusion.

Beside him, Dorothea lifted a finger in the air. She stated matter-of-factly, “I’m afraid, Lord Nicks, that the people to whom Finley refers are trying to get in your family’s good graces. Young Leon is a popular man.”

Dorothea didn’t account for Finley’s own character in her assumption of their motives whatsoever. She assumed their intentions lay solely with Leon. For Finley, that chafed. Her bottom lip protruded in a pout.

Nicks glanced briefly at Finley before changing the subject. “Leaving Leon aside for the moment... Have you found any guys you like?”

Finley paused to consider his question, conjuring up a mental image of the one male student she often spoke with. Oscar was a complete moron, to be sure, but he was a decent person at heart. It was difficult not to like him.

“There’s this one guy,” she admitted, “but I only like him as a friend.”

Nicks smiled. “Hey, nothing wrong with that!”

Finley and the rest of the gang continued chatting as they made their way toward the capital proper.

Since school wasn’t in session, most students were off enjoying their free time and left the academy’s main building largely deserted. The only people present were students who had business at the school or the staff. Naturally, the library was empty as well, save for Marie who had secretly snuck her way in.

“Why do I always get stuck doing this kinda stuff?” she grumbled under her breath.

Her mission was to investigate certain individuals, hence the subterfuge. Leon had tasked her with looking into the protagonist, Mia, and Erica, the villainous princess.

“That’s just how it goes,” Cleare said as she floated in the air nearby. “Master and Luxion are busy looking into matters outside the academy, so this task falls to us.”

“You mean the serial killings, right? Wish he’d prioritize taking care of things

here at the school instead of trying to play at being detective.”

Marie crouched low and slowly crept forward, careful not to make any sounds that might alert her target to her approach. Any sounds aside from her hushed whispers, of course.

“Think about it! Big Bro’s got a bounty on his head. Kinda risky for him to be waltzing around the streets of the capital like that, ain’t it?”

“He has Luxion with him, so he’ll be...well, maybe not *fine*,” Cleare amended. “But Luxion’s main body is stationed close to the capital, and Arroganz is primed for battle, ready to deploy whenever.”

“That’s reassuring, if not a bit creepy. But still! It’s ’cause of them that I’m stuck trying to dig up info on the protag and villainess all by myself. And what really gets my goat is how adamant Big Bro was about keeping away from this guardian knight dude!”

“Master is wary of him.”

Marie and Cleare inched closer to their target but froze when they heard voices coming from behind one of the nearby bookshelves. It sounded like a boy and a girl. It seemed as though their hands had briefly brushed as they were trying to extract a book from the shelves.

“Pardon me.”

“Oh, no, I should be the one to apologize.”

The moment seemed so romantic, so picturesque, that Marie was consumed with envy. She couldn’t help herself. She had to look.

“Meeting in a library like this... It’s like something straight out of an otome game. Reminds me of the protag—urk?!”

No sooner had she snuck a peek around the corner than she spotted Jake and a female student in the aisle between the shelves. Jake was slightly shorter than the average guys his age; the girl was tall enough that he had to tilt his neck to look up at her. She had glistening, well-groomed brown hair that fell to her lower back. She was slender with perfect posture, suggesting a strength in her core that only came from martial training.

As Jake peered up, he shoved the book at her. "I'll get a different one," he said.

"No, it wouldn't be right for me to impose on you like that. I'm in no hurry."

Jake jaw fell open at the way she politely rebuffed his offer. "I expected a more crude response from someone with fighting experience, but you must be more spineless than you look. You're tall and toned, so you have to be strong, right?" The second prince's words were as insensitive as ever.

The girl's cheeks brightened as she answered, "I, um...actually have a bit of a complex about my height. It's not very cute."

Jake flinched at that unexpected response. "Sorry. You look powerful, so I was kinda jealous, but I shouldn't be so rude to a girl. Forgive the discourtesy. My name's Jake. And you are?"

The female student gave a strained smile. "I'm Erin, a second-year. Those close to me call me Eri, Prince Jake."



“My reputation precedes me, huh? So, Erin...nah, Eri does suit you better. I’d like to call you that too. If you don’t mind?”

Jake treated the girl no differently even though she had just revealed herself to be a year ahead of him. It was normally disrespectful not to show deference to upperclassman, but there was no malice suggested by Jake’s attitude; this was simply the kind of person that he was.

Erin’s—or rather, Eri’s—smile grew warm. “Yes, please do.”

“Figured my impertinence would bug ya...heh. You’re an interesting girl. I’ve taken a liking to you. Go on and call me Jake. No need for formal titles.”

“I-I couldn’t possibly...”

“My decision’s final. If you don’t follow my orders, I’ll have you arrested for disrespecting the royal family.”

Faced with such exaggerated consequences, Eri had no choice but to reluctantly acquiesce.

Cleare started to fume indignantly as she eavesdropped on the developing conversation. “Erin’s going by the nickname Eri, is she? That’s far too close to the nickname Livia gave me—Cleary! I won’t stand for this. Erin’s definitely going to be hearing from me.”

On the opposite end of the emotional spectrum, Marie had gone white as a sheet, horrified by what she’d witnessed. In a small voice she said, “This... This was supposed to be the event in the game where the protagonist and Prince Jake first meet.”

The scene had jogged her memory. The conversation between Jake and Erin was taken nearly word-for-word from the game. Unfortunately, the protagonist was nowhere in sight.

“Why are two of the love interests having this scene together?!” Marie writhed on the floor, grasping her own head. Her original mission was entirely forgotten in the wake of spying on the two students.

“Is something the matter?” a voice interrupted.

“Huh?”

Marie peered up to find the villainous princess, Erica, looming over her and scrutinizing her countenance. Erica's features looked much softer and more inviting than Marie remembered from the game, and in spite of being two years younger, she had still thought to call out and check on Marie. Cleare had vanished altogether.

A flustered Marie scrambled to her feet. "I-It's nothing. I'm fine. Sudden headache, that's all."

"Then you aren't fine at all."

"No, I'm okay now, promise. Some shocking turns sent me into a panic, but really, there's nothing to worry about." Marie forced a smile as she tried to wriggle her way out of this awkward conversation.

Erica tilted her head with a gentle smile. "I see. But, Miss Marie, I do believe it's best to keep one's voice down inside the library."

"You know my name?"

Why would a princess know who she was? A cold sweat beaded upon Marie's forehead.

Erica giggled. "I may not look it, but I am a princess. I know of our kingdom's Saint. Um, I also know that my brother happens to be in your care."

It didn't take a genius to realize that a princess like Erica would have heard of Marie before. That possibility had slipped Marie's mind in her panic.

"A-ah ha ha... Right! It's a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance."

Jake and Eri made their way over as they conversed. Jake pulled a face the moment he spotted Erica, sneering as though the misfortune of running into her had ruined his day. Marie had her own misgivings about their accidental encounter.

I smell trouble. Erica and Jake's had a terrible relationship in the game.

"Oh, so it's *you*," said Jake.

"I didn't realize you were also present in the library, Elder Brother."

"Knock off the elder brother crap. I'm like a couple of months older than you

at most.”

“A couple of months or no, you are still older than me, hence Elder Brother.”

The two had different mothers, which explained why Jake was so off-kilter around Erica. However, their exchange here lacked the guarded caution on his part that Marie remembered from the game. This was an enormous shift. She was completely at a loss to what had happened.

What the heck is going on? In the game, Prince Jake sensed Erica's rotten personality lurking beneath her smarmy polite mask. That's why he was so wary of her, but this...this is totally different.

That evening, I sported a casual outfit to stroll through the capital's streets. Luxion floated beside me, rendered invisible by his cloaking abilities.

“What is that tramp *thinking*, coming to the capital like this?” I demanded with a scowl. “She'd be better off keeping her head low at home.”

“She claims her visit is to search for a marriage partner. Shall I search for one whose genes would best complement hers?”

“All she cares about is how much cash they have and how handsome they are.”

“A man's dependability, financial or otherwise, has long been a desirable trait for the opposite sex. Success is mark of superiority. Courtesy of my presence, you are more financially and physically dependable than any of your peers... which begs the question of why women seem so ill inclined to approach you. I must assume that it's some other fatal flaw that repels them. You agree, yes?”

Glad to see you're as spiteful as ever toward your master.

“I have more than enough women around me already, thank you very much. Three, if you'll remember. Going after any more is just greedy. You should be happy to have such a modest master.”

“A truly modest man would not have a harem at all.” He froze for a moment. When he next spoke, his tone changed into a strident announcement. “Master, there's been an incident.”

“Another one?”

I followed Luxion’s directions to the scene of the latest murder. A crowd had formed ahead of me; the heightened security around the capital meant that Kingdom soldiers were already present. They had placed a sheet of cloth over the dead.

“Another official, huh?”

“The guys at the top are gonna make another fuss about this.”

Onlookers were beginning to circle around the victim by now, anxious to get a peek at the commotion. It was impossible to get close with so many people around. I had no choice but to rely on Luxion and his ability to remain out of view. The only issue was that, thanks to the Demonic Suit’s interference, he was unable to gather intel as effectively as before.

“This is the seventh one, isn’t it?” I asked.

“The victim this time has all the trademarks of the others. An official who recently received a promotion. I sense traces of Demonic Suit being used here.”

We’d raced to the scene of the crime but had no more information to show for it. Zero progress.

“Looks like their only targets are officials who’ve moved up the ranks.”

“What puzzles me most about these incidents is the usage of the Demonic Suit. Where did our culprit obtain such a thing?” Luxion wondered aloud.

My thoughts flew to the Black Knight and Serge, both of whom had been consumed by a Demonic Suit. I shook my head in dismay. No human should ever stoop to using those things.

“No idea...but I sure don’t like assuming that there are a bunch out there lying around in the open, waiting to be found.”

“I concur. Their very existence is abhorrent.” Luxion had a deep-seated hatred for the Demonic Suits. It was why he eagerly agreed to cooperate in my investigation.

We peeled ourselves away from the tragic scene and happened to pass someone unexpected. Shocked, I spun back around to face our interloper. He,

too, had noticed me—he froze in place, turning only his torso back to glance at me. The shock on his face mirrored my own.

“What is the Empire’s guardian knight doing here?” I demanded.

Equally suspicious of me, Hering narrowed his eyes. “I merely wanted to take a look around the Kingdom’s capital. I was sightseeing. More to the point, this is the second time I have encountered you at the scene of one of these murders.”

You’re acting like I’m the fishy one here? You’re practically a sushi chef, bub!

“What a coincidence. I was thinking the same thing about you.”

This guardian knight didn’t exist in the third game’s scenario. That was suspicious enough, but after seeing him for a second time at the scene of the crime? This guy was red flag city. I only backed down in the end because I had no incriminating evidence. Antagonizing him unnecessarily would do me no favors, and I didn’t want a repeat of what went down with Serge. I’d need to run a thorough investigation on him before settling on a course of action.

“If it’s sightseeing you’re after, there are plenty of more famous spots than this. Why not go there?” I said, beginning to walk away.

“I may do exactly that,” Hering answered. He left as well.

Once we had put sufficient distance between ourselves and the crime scene, Luxion turned to me and said, “Master, that man is dangerous. I sensed a faint trace of a Demonic Suit on him.”

“You think he’s our guy?”

“The possibility is exceedingly high. He may be here on the pretense of studying abroad, but the Holy Magic Empire and the Holy Kingdom have long held ties to one another.”

Well, they do sound kinda similar since they’ve both got Holy in their names, but I wouldn’t have guessed they’d been in cahoots for years. Wait a sec. I learned something about this in class... I didn’t think much of it at the time, except that the Holy Kingdom of Rachel is Miss Mylene’s enemy.

“Pretty sure one of our lessons mentioned this...” I muttered to myself.

“Were you not aware of it?”

Luxion sounded more wary of Hering than ever before now that he'd sensed the presence of a Demonic Suit on him. I shared his unease.

"I'd like to look into his motives," I said. "What's driving him to do this?"

"It is folly to hope for any semblance of reason from a Demonic Suit. Master, those things are weapons of the new humans—the primary cause for the world's destruction. Contemplating their actions is a waste of effort. I request that you grant access for me to deploy my main body and Arroganz immediately."

"No. You want to turn the capital into a sea of flames?"

You would expect an artificial intelligence to be less prone to emotional outbursts, but Luxion lost all sense of reason when it came to Demonic Suits. I did agree with him on one thing: We couldn't trust Hering.

"Luxion, make absolutely sure Angie and the other girls keep their curfew. Tell them not to go out at night either if they can help it."

"Understood."

It was the middle of the night when a woman snuck onto the campus. She made her way to a shed where tools were typically stored. The moment she arrived, the door swung open to welcome her. The woman pressed a handkerchief over her mouth as she ducked inside, her eyebrows drawing together in dismay; the air within the shed was musty and stale. Garden tools were stored along the walls or strewn about. The place was a mess.

"Couldn't you prepare somewhere more pleasant for us to meet?" Merce grumbled at her younger brother, Rutart.

Rutart wore his work clothes, which were stained in all manner of filth. He was irritable after a day of gardening busywork at the school—work to which he was altogether unaccustomed.

"You think staff like me have that kind of power? If I had to get roped into working here, why not a comfy office job? Flailing around with soil is utterly beneath me."

Rutart had taken on this undercover work at the behest of the Ladies of the Forest. He'd been entrusted with the task of gathering intel and laying the necessary groundwork for their schemes. Alas, things hadn't gone so well for him.

"Big talk for someone who's never worked a day in his life," Merce shot back.

"Sh-shut up! I'd work harder if the job suited me better. I'd make a far finer marquess than certain people, if we're being honest," Rutart said, stewing with jealousy over the difference in status between him and Leon.

Merce regarded him with disgust. She and Rutart were related by blood, yes, but that was precisely why his lack of any discernible talent stood out to her. "I hate that scumbag's guts as much as the next person, but you don't hold a candle to him. You couldn't even beat Nicks on a good day."

"I-I could too! If our plans work out, I'll steal everything from the both of them. Then I'll be the one with the marquess title!"

Merce sighed, uninterested in his bravado. "Sure, you do that. Dream big. Anyway, are you going to be able to fulfill your duty? Failure is out of the question."

"I'm supposed to kidnap some girl, right? Even I can do that much."

"Lord Gabino warned us that we'd better produce results. We have no chance of returning to the lap of luxury if we don't."

"I know, okay? I've got it covered. It's an injustice that we're being forced to live like this."

The two were convinced of the righteousness of their cause. They continued their secret maneuvers, safe in the knowledge that they had the Holy Kingdom of Rachel's backing.

"Hold up. You're telling me that one of the love interests...has captured the interest of another love interest and is interested in that love interest? Gimme a break! I can't keep up. What have I done to deserve this? I'd rather someone put me out of my misery at this point."

Marie filled me in on the school's goings on after I returned, and I was left cradling my head in my hands. For some reason, Erin—or Eri, which was too close to Cleare's nickname for her liking, so maybe Rin would be better?—had triggered the introduction event with Prince Jake that was supposed to be reserved for the protagonist. Who would predict that two love interests could start a budding romantic relationship like this?

Marie and I had our hands pressed over our foreheads, as if battling serious headaches—which, honestly, wasn't much of an exaggeration.

"Beats me. I'm as lost and confused about this whole mess as you are. And now Mia's suddenly lost another possible love interest from her list of potential partners!"

"You guys did this. There's something wrong with your heads, turning a love interest into a girl."

"I wouldn't have gone along with it if I knew it turned out like this! Blame Cleare!"

"Rie, how could you?!"

The three of us bickered while Luxion looked on in as much abject misery as an AI could project. "You are all beyond redemption. With the situation as it stands now, would it not make more sense to arrange something between Mia and one of her love interests?"

I felt like Luxion had the right idea about how to solve the problem, but I couldn't do it.

"Nah, we'd better not," I said.

Forcing Prince Jake and Mia together was a fine idea on paper, but I'd rather not cause any unnecessary issues by getting further involved. It was a bit late to take that stance now, but we had enough unexpected curveballs to deal with. We sure didn't need any more.

Then there was what happened in the Alzer Republic with Noelle. Her younger twin Lelia (a reincarnated guest from Japan like Marie and me) had attempted to force her into a relationship with one of her love interests with some pretty dire consequences. There was no guarantee the same thing

wouldn't happen if we tried it. I preferred instead to let the cards fall where they may. Fortunately, the most concerning aspect of any installment in the series was its final boss, and I'd defeated the one for the third game well in advance.

Incidentally, this little secretive meeting in ours wasn't taking place in my room but in some bushes on campus grounds. The four of us were huddled together exchanging information.

"Let's move on," I suggested. "A seventh victim was found inside the city."

"Another one? You shouldn't go out into the streets then, Big Bro. Aren't you scared of this serial killer?"

"Nah, don't worry. I'm a serial killer too."

In fact, if one were to tally up all the lives I had taken, it far outnumbered our culprit's victims—the only difference was that my kills had been on the battlefield. This little joke was meant as a dash of black humor, but despite my thin smile, Marie turned her back on me with an angry huff.

"Don't make weird jokes like that."

"My bad. My point is we'll be just fine. I'm making an effort to let myself be seen when I'm out there walking. More importantly, you'd better not grow complacent just because you're staying inside the school."

Danger was everywhere, both inside and outside the academy.

"You can leave the security of the campus to me," Cleare said. "And while I'm at it, Luxion, you've gotta take care of this Demonic Suit. I can't compete with those things like you can."

Everyone's eyes turned toward Luxion.

"Rest assured, I have things well in hand. I will annihilate all remnants of the new humans."

Promising though that sounded, it was kind of terrifying too.

The month of May called for tea parties. These were my first in a long time

since I had been away in the Republic, but although the custom remained, its purpose and function had changed. The boys had invited the girls back in my first year, but now gender was irrelevant; girls or boys could invite anyone of their choosing.

I was so moved by Master's lofty ambitions of spreading the joy of tea that I proactively advised Finley on her tea party. Well, I guess it was more of a nitpicking session.

"Do you know a single thing about tea?!"

"Eek!"

After guzzling down a cup of her fresh brew, the criticism flowed. I couldn't have found a single compliment to give if I'd tried. She'd done a terrible job from brew to pour.

"You didn't get anything right. It's obvious how lightly you're taking this by the taste of your tea! You think you can just whip up a cup and that's all it takes. And your snacks aren't any better. They don't match the flavor of tea you prepared in the least!" I waved a dismissive hand. "Try again."

"You don't have to get so angry about it!"

"Yes I do. If you hold a terrible tea party, it will reflect poorly on me."

"Worry about your own tea party, why don't you," Finley snapped back.

"Oh, worry not. I have been preparing for mine since April."

She sneered. "What the heck? That's creepy. You're always so half-hearted and noncommittal about everything else. Why are you so obsessed about tea?"

"Never mind that. Start over."

Thoroughly dispirited, Finley dropped her shoulders and dragged her feet toward the kitchen.

"You've got this, Miss Finley!"

For some reason, Oscar was here acting like Finley's cheerleader. He happily drank her tea and consumed her snacks, acting for all the world like it was the most natural thing for him to be here.

“What are you even doing here, Oscar? You’re Prince Jake’s foster brother. Shouldn’t you be with him?” I was subtly hinting that he should follow Jilk’s example and stay glued to Prince Jake’s hip. Unfortunately for me, Oscar was completely incapable of reading between the lines.

“I appreciate your concern, truly I do. However, His Highness treasures his time with Miss Eri. As his foster brother, it’s my duty not to interrupt them.”

Oblivious to a fault, but at least he was a decent guy at heart. No wonder Julius was so willing to trade Jilk for him.

But please, for the love of all that is holy, get it into your skull that you’re one of the love interests of this game! I get that it’s selfish of me to ask that, but still!

“You and Finley seem to be awfully close. You’re, uh, not dating, are you?” I asked.

“Her close companionship is a blessing that I treasure daily! But no, unfortunately, we are no more than friends.”

“Unfortunately?! You *want* to be with her? There are other, cuter girls in your class, right? Like the exchange student, for instance!” I threw that out there to gauge his interest in the protagonist, but to my chagrin, his head tilted to the side in a bemused slump.

“My apologies. I haven’t yet memorized the names of all of my classmates, so I don’t know of whom you speak.”

“C’mon, you should at least remember someone as unique as her! She’s an exchange student from the Empire, for crying out loud!”

“Ahh, I think I recall her appearance in some detail, yes. I agree, she is quite the adorable young lady...but what of it?” Oscar’s disinterest was painfully blatant.

I practically felt my soul leaving my body.

Why, of all people that Oscar could have expressed interest in, did it have to be Finley? I could barely comprehend the shock. How was I supposed to report this to Marie and our two AI companions?

“Are you a complete moron?” Marie asked. “Be honest with me, Big Bro. You are, aren’t you?”

“Gotta say, I never pictured Fin snagging one of the love interests for herself like that. But this problem lands square on your shoulders, doesn’t it, Master?” Cleare looked straight at me.

Anyone wanna explain why I’m taking the fall for this crap?

The four of us were once again huddled together in our spot among the bushes, commencing our secret meeting once again. I had confided in Marie and Cleare hoping for advice. All I got was a bowl of cold, hard criticism.

“Did you consider the possibility that maybe it’s not Fin he’s after? He could be pursuing you instead, Master,” Cleare suggested. “Oh, I don’t mean in a romantic or sexual sense. More like, maybe he’s hoping to secure a connection to you by getting close to her.”

Marie shook her head before Cleare was finished speaking. “He’s not clever enough to scheme like that. He has less brains than a scarecrow, but he’s not a bad guy.”

If Oscar really was that calculating, I’d have to commend him for pulling the wool over everyone’s eyes. Marie was right—all I had seen of him assured me he was a decent person. An idiot, yes, but a decent person. His greatest flaw was his complete preoccupation with Finley.

It wasn’t so long ago that I had chastised Cleare and Marie for the incident with Jake and Eri, but now I found myself on the receiving end thanks to Finley and Oscar.

“Guess there’s only two left,” Marie said, referring to the number of love interests still (hopefully) available.

We had somehow screwed things up bad enough that the protagonist had only two potential romantic partners left. Considering we’d tried to stay out of things ever since Marie and Cleare’s sex-change screwup with Eri, everything was falling apart at the seams!

Chapter 5:

The Holy Kingdom of Rachel

IT WAS EVENING when Fred wandered into a deserted alleyway. He trembled in fear, his eyes restlessly darting back and forth to scan the area. He knew of the serial murders and that government officials were being targeted and summarily assassinated. Part of him worried he might end up being one such victim himself.

At last, he spotted someone in the dark—a woman with a hood pulled over her head, beckoning to him. When he approached, she lowered the hood, revealing her face.

“You’re late, Fred.” Merce wasted no formalities on him despite his prestigious role as a palace physician. Fred couldn’t censure her for it either, knowing what kind of dirt she had on him. He bit back whatever complaints he may have had and handed her the item he’d brought along.

“As promised,” he said.

Merce examined the small vial in her hand, grinning like a mischievous child. Her eyes danced with an ominous light as she returned her gaze to Fred. “I’m glad to see you brought this. It has the qualities I requested, right?”

Unsurprisingly, the item in question was a poison.

“It’s tasteless, odorless, and slow-acting. No one would notice if you mixed in their drink. A-and since I prepared it like you asked, you’ll keep your end of the bargain, right?”

“I’ll keep quiet about your secrets, rest assured. I’m more impressed that you were willing to betray such a close friend as His Majesty.” Merce smiled mockingly as she stowed her prize away in her pocket. Her hand then shot out, grabbing Fred by the collar of his shirt. “When that worthless king collapses, you had *better* do as you’ve been instructed. I don’t care how you do it, but buy some time and stir up confusion.”

The color drained from Fred's face.

"Wh-what are you people planning?!"

Merce shoved him, sending Fred stumbling back until he lost his balance and landed square on his behind. Merce stared down at him, a malicious smile on her face.

"That's classified...but I'll be nice and fill you in anyway. The Kingdom will return to its rightful state very, very soon. Exciting, no?" With those parting words, Merce turned on her heel to head for the bar where Roland awaited her. She felt better than she had in days now that she and her coconspirators were on the cusp of success.

"It'll soon be a month since we first met, but you're as frigid as ever, Merce," said Roland.

By the time they finished their date, left the bar, and began their goodbyes it was past midnight. Calling it a date was a bit of a stretch, since all they did together was drink. Never had they done anything more intimate than that.

"There you go again calling me cold," she smirked. "Need I remind you that I'm a woman of standards?"

Roland noticed her high spirits. He leaned toward her face to try his luck. "In that case, how about a goodbye kiss—"

Merce pressed a finger to his lips, stopping his advance. "We should save that for our next meeting. I had fun today, Mr. Leon." She walked away this time with a spring in her step.

Roland expelled a long, drawn-out sigh as he watched her leave. "It's always next time with her. What a tease. But now that our date is over, I suppose I should be getting back."

After parting ways with Roland, Merce made her way back to the Ladies of the Forest's underground hideout. Gabino happened to be visiting the place at that exact moment. He offered Merce a smile when he noticed her.

“If it isn’t Lady Merce! That smile on your face tells me that everything is going according to plan. Am I correct?”

“Y-yes, Lord Gabino. I have done as you instructed.” Merce’s face was already flushed from the alcohol she had consumed during her outing with the king, but her cheeks gained an even deeper crimson shade upon hearing Gabino’s kind, gentlemanly voice.

Gabino strode over to her and took her hand in his, squeezing it in delight. “How wonderful! Splendid job, carrying everything out as I asked. Pandemonium will soon grip the Kingdom, and everyone’s efforts will finally be rewarded! You are an amazing woman, Lady Merce.”

“D-do you mean it?” Her heart soared; Merce had not been complimented by a man like this in a very long time.

Seeing her daughter showered with such praise, Zola hurried over. “Lord Gabino, I have been working hard as well!” It was almost as if she was trying to outshine Merce.

“Yes, I haven’t forgotten your efforts. It’s laudable that you’ve persevered through such arduous days in such an austere place, far from the light of the surface. In but a few more days, the Kingdom will return to its rightful state, and you will again be able to live the refined life you deserve.”

All of the women present looked relieved to hear Gabino’s reassurances.

The representative of the Ladies of the Forest glanced at one of the thick, tightly sealed doors along the wall and said to Gabino, “By the way, my lord, I have prepared another one for you.”

The other ladies’ eyes turned toward the door. Muffled, pained cries could be heard from the other side. Everyone shrank back in fear.

Gabino smiled. “In that case, why don’t we start the procedure, hm?”

After leaving the Ladies of the Forest’s hideout, Gabino strode into the city with a subordinate close behind him. He had a notebook in his hand. Recorded in those pages were the names of not only the members of the aforementioned

order but of other former aristocrats concealed secretly throughout the capital, as well as other organizations who were dissatisfied with the new order. Gabino contemplated the situation silently as he scanned the pages.

“Why didn’t we prepare the poison for them to use ourselves?” asked his subordinate. His question to Gabino was understandable; were they to brew their own poison, it would narrow down unpredictable variables.

“How naive,” Gabino spat at him. “What happens with the poison is irrelevant to us. Do you truly think those halfwits can pull off their schemes? Our true mission lies elsewhere.”

“I realize that, but their success would secure Holfort Kingdom as our puppet. If our supporters took the reins here, it would free up our countrymen in Rachel to focus their efforts on Lepart.”

Gabino shot a cold look at the man. “They *won’t* succeed. It’s better to crush them underfoot knowing their failure is inevitable. That said, I suppose I should at least compliment them on being able to poison that eyesore Roland.” As he spoke, he traced a finger over the scar on his forehead—the one he’d received while he was in the Alzer Republic.

All trace of emotion faded from Gabino’s face. He continued walking, heading off to visit the next group’s hideout.

The following morning, Mylene and Roland sat at the same table to eat breakfast together. Perhaps “together” was a misnomer; they sat at either end of a rectangular table. They faced each other, but it was across an enormous distance. Mylene thought it rather symbolic.

Their marriage had been a political one with no love involved. Mylene understood that was fairly typical for people of their station, but Roland’s eager trips out of the palace to cavort with other women annoyed her. She had no way to vent her frustrations except through passive aggressive remarks.

“You were out drinking late again last night, I see,” she said.

Roland’s complexion was terrible, and he was barely picking at his meal. A weary Mylene attributed this to his hangover. She resented how he pushed his

administrative duties off on her while he went out to have fun. Perhaps she could have forgiven it if Roland were a complete wastrel, but he was fairly competent at his work—nowhere near her equal, but competent. When push came to shove, he did a respectable job. That made it all the more infuriating to her that he preferred to neglect his duties.

Strangely, she noticed, he was less talkative today than usual.

Normally he'd have some kind of smart aleck retort at least, but today... nothing.

Though it weighed on her mind, she pressed on, “It has been dangerous out there lately. We have increased our patrols, but it’s no less risky for you to be wandering the streets. You should refrain from going out for the time being and —”

Mylene’s voice trailed off. She shot out of her chair, knocking it back onto the ground as she raced over to Roland. Other servants and staff in the immediate vicinity scrambled to join her.

Roland, deathly pale, started to slip from his chair. He collapsed onto the ground before she could make it to him and made no move to pull himself back up.

“Your Majesty!” Mylene cried as she collapsed to her knees beside him. She was relieved to find he was still breathing. “Summon Lord Fred here immediately! Your Majesty, are you all right?! The physician will soon be on his way here.”



Roland's eyes cracked open. He reached a hand out toward Mylene, grabbing her arm. It took all his strength to force his voice out and mutter, "Keep my condition a secret... And if...anything happens...have that brat..."

His sentence split into a bout of erratic coughs before he could finish.

"Your Majesty..." Tears began spilling down Mylene's cheeks. "My love..."

The academy was abuzz with people hurrying to prepare for their tea parties in time. Some scrambled to invite people while other students gushed excitedly about a party they'd been invited to.

I wasn't opposed to the liveliness consuming the school, but I had other business to preoccupy me. Once lessons for the day had ended, Livia and I made our way to the library with Luxion in tow, although the latter cloaked himself to dodge participating in our conversation. There were other students occupying the library as well, poring over books, but there were very few of them and none in our immediate vicinity. Livia and I were essentially alone.

I was here to gather information on the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit. Livia asked to tag along so she could help me out. Currently, my nose was buried in a book detailing the relationship between the Empire and the Holy Kingdom. We'd touched on the subject in class, but this book was more forthcoming with detail.

"Says here that in the past, the Empire gifted Rachel a special Armor as a symbol of their friendship. Looks like they started using the word 'holy' in their kingdom's official name around then."

The way the book told it, the two nations formed this bond of friendship far in the distant past. Those ties had persisted over all that time and kept them in close contact. This made them an ally of Mylene's enemy...and so, my enemy.

Guess the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit is going on my list of hated countries. Not that it's much of a list. The only other country on there is Rachel.

It followed that the protagonist of the third series had ties to Rachel as well. All I could do was pray that the situation didn't devolve any further than it

already had.

“Mr. Leon, I hear you’re being reckless again,” Livia said from her seat directly beside me. Her statement was framed almost like a question, but she didn’t look up from the book she was reading.

“Things are rough right now because a lot of crap is happening,” I told her, aware of how cagey I was being. “I’ve gotta lecture the first-years for acting like idiots and pitch in with Finley’s tea party besides.”

It may not have seemed like it, but my days were jam-packed. Each time one of our ignorant male first-year students caused a fuss, I was summoned to play mediator (for reasons beyond my comprehension). The majority of these squabbles were between male and female students. I could have washed my hands of these issues if they were romantic spats, but much to my displeasure, they were more fundamental than that. Each time it was a girl wanting me to step in to save them from a guy who was being a douche.

Livia’s hand froze on the edge of the page as she turned her gaze to me. Her lips thinned. I’d misunderstood what she was getting at.

“My understanding is that you’ve been going out every night on walks, haven’t you?”

I furrowed my brows. “Who told you that? Roland?”

If anyone knew of my activities at night, I thought it would be Roland, but Livia quickly shook her head.

“You go out so often that of course other students have taken notice. Rumors are going around.” She pinned me with a stern look.

I averted my gaze. I couldn’t explain in detail as to why I was going out like that, so my only choice was to play it off. “I-I’m, er, not doing anything suspicious. I s-swear.”

I definitely didn’t want her thinking I was out on the town with other girls every night. Best to clear the air of that misunderstanding quickly.

“I don’t smell any other girl on you or anything, so I’m not suspecting foul play there. But you *are* doing something dangerous, aren’t you?”

“Well, maybe a little... Hold up. Smell? What do you mean smell?”

“Leon, please... Tell me what you’re doing?” she asked, ignoring my question.

I wondered how much she already knew. With no way to be certain, I decided to mix in some measure of truth in my explanation. The trick to telling a good lie was to cleverly weave it in with actual fact. Of course, an honest, upright person such as myself never told lies. I just, y’know, hid inconvenient truths when it suited me.

“Nothing too big. I’m following this serial murder case that’s terrorizing the capital. They still haven’t caught the culprit, so none of us can rest easy ’til they do.”

“That isn’t your job. It’s way too risky to get involved in that.”

My heart ached to see her anxious frown. Unfortunately, I had good cause to get involved. I had to pursue this.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’ll explain everything once it’s all over. If anything happens in the meantime, you can turn to Cleare for any help you might need.”

“Do you trust us that little?”

“It’s not like that.”

“I know how important we are to you, but I wish you’d lean on us more. Angie and I have worked so hard to improve, hoping we can be useful. We’re not the delicate maidens we once were.”

I’d heard about Angie and Livia’s hard work while I was away on foreign exchange. Specifically, Cleare volunteered the information without me having to ask a thing. It warmed my heart to know how much effort they’d exerted on my behalf, but I was loath to drag either of them into a precarious situation.

“I hear you, but I don’t want to put you guys in harm’s way,” I said.

“Do you consider us baggage? You may not think it, but I’m—”

“It’s male pride,” I interrupted. I knew that Livia outpaced me when it came to magic, knowledge, and even ability—I wasn’t too vain to openly acknowledge it. But I couldn’t bring her into this fight. “If I don’t ever prove my mettle, what’s to stop you guys from leaving me in the dust?”

I would be nothing without Luxion, I knew that...but I had some pride.

“Neither Angie nor I would ever abandon you,” Livia said, unconvinced. Mood soured, she returned her gaze to her book.

I sighed. I wish I had the perfect way to explain stuff to her. I tried to resume reading, but Livia’s voice interrupted me.

“No matter what happens, I won’t turn my back on you. But if you do it to me...I swear I’ll follow you to the ends of the earth to win you back.”

An oblivious man would be overjoyed at her proclamation. I, knowing better, sensed the underlying threat. Feeling awkward, I chanced a peek at her face. Livia’s attention remained on her book, eyes tracing the lines for any information that might help our cause. Her ordinary-seeming appearance made her words all the more unnerving. Blame the way she said it, perhaps—my inner alarm system was screaming.

“I, um, I’m very sorry. Please forgive me,” I said, almost on reflex.

Livia lifted her gaze. When her eyes met mine, she was smiling. “What are you apologizing for?”

There was nothing ominous about her smile, really. It was gentle and sweet. But why did I sense an unspoken question behind her words? Like... *Don’t tell me you actually intend to abandon us?* Her smile stretched from ear to ear, lending it a suffocating, oppressive quality...in my opinion. I had to be reading into this too deeply. Right? My sweet Livia could never be so terrifying.

After a long pause, I said, “Forget I said anything.”

I was certain that if anyone ended up abandoned, it would be me. I could easily see myself draining my fiancées’ goodwill until their affection for me was a distant memory.

Noelle had stopped by Angie’s room in the girls’ dormitory and was sitting in a chair as she drank in her surroundings.

“And I thought my room was huge! Yours has it beat by a mile,” she said.

That was saying something, considering that the academy had furnished

Noelle with a luxurious room of her own. It didn't bother her that Angie's was the more impressive one. If anything, she felt restless in her own room. The space and decor were more lavish than she was accustomed to. One thing she did notice about Angie's room was that many of Livia's things were scattered about it.

Does that mean the two of them are using it together? Noelle wondered. She was aware that Livia had her own room here at the dormitory, but perhaps the two of them normally hung out in Angie's quarters.

"Sorry for making you come all the way here," Angie said.

"Hey, it was no sweat."

"To tell the truth, there's something I want to consult you about regarding Leon. His recent movements seem secretive, as though he is trying to keep us in the dark about his activities." Angie folded her arms over her chest and lowered her gaze to the floor. She sighed. Noelle got the impression that while she was concerned about Leon's well-being, she was disappointed in him as well.

Livia, who was also present, had her eyebrows knit in an angry line. She looked more somber than usual. She added, "He and Lux went out together again today, despite how he's been stressing the importance of abiding curfew to us."

Noelle knew of his nightly forays into the city. The professors had to be aware of his activities themselves, but not one of them spoke a word of admonishment to him despite his blatant flouting of the curfew. The lack of consequences bespoke the power of his influence. As his fiancée, Noelle was quite displeased about the state of affairs.

"If we trust Rie, he's not out fooling around with girls. He's going after this serial killer...which is like, a billion times scarier," Noelle said. Far from being infuriated at Leon's latest escapade, she was scared for his safety. He was a *student*, for goodness' sake. What was he thinking?

"Yes, the assassination of court nobles," Angie said, placing some documents on the table. Noelle guessed she'd looked into the matter for herself. "All of the victims obtained their positions recently, but every last one of them were competent at their jobs."

Due to the war between Holfort Kingdom and the former Principality of Fanoss (which had been incorporated into the Kingdom as a dukedom), reformation had become inevitable within Holfort's upper crust. Many had betrayed their country, with some deserting in its hour of need. All who turned their backs on Holfort had their houses dismantled—and that was no small number. The Kingdom was left in dire need of manpower for administrative roles. They had replenished their ranks with a number of promising young men...who now found themselves the target of this serial killer. Seven victims had been claimed so far.

Noelle reached for the documents and scanned their contents. "Could this assassin be someone whose post was stolen from them?"

"A high possibility, I suspect," said Angie. "But for the culprit to remain at large reflects poorly on capital authorities. Unless the culprit is someone particularly exceptional, they should have been caught by now." Angie made no attempt to veil her scorn for the capital police who had failed in their duty. To her, their inaction had prompted Leon to make his move instead.

Livia shivered in fear at the thought of Leon facing a potentially powerful killer. "He's always so reckless... I worry about him."

"Things look bad in the city, but the academy has its own problems. Rie's been unusually fidgety lately, and I've spotted some rather fishy-looking staff on the grounds," said Noelle. While the others were preoccupied with outside threats, her concerns lay closer to home.

"Come to think of it, when I was walking with Mr. Leon before, I caught sight of one of the staff glowering at us," Livia said thoughtfully.

Noelle frowned. "You too? The same thing happened to me when I was with Leon, but he said not to worry about it. The other girls were gossiping about it, saying sometimes the staff glare at couples or something."

Angie quirked a brow, puzzled by this latest news. "I don't remember ever having staff glare at me when I was with Leon." This perceived discrimination didn't appear to rest well with her.

Noelle reassured her, "Miss Angelica, that's gotta be because you're so famous here in the Kingdom. Your status is so high that the staff cower in your

presence, so none of them would be brave enough to glare. Don'tcha think?"

"I...suppose? But couldn't they have assumed that I'm not his romantic partner, unlike you two?"

"U-uhh... That sounds pretty unlikely."

Noelle couldn't put it so bluntly, but she suspected the real reason was that Angie's strong-willed and intimidating demeanor meant that the staff didn't dare try anything funny around her.

The nearby lamp in the school's inner courtyard cast shadows around Marie as she waited for someone in the darkness. On the day that she accidentally ran into Erica in the library, she made a promise with the girl to speak privately with her. The night of that agreed upon meeting had arrived.

Being part of the royal family, Erica had many followers, which complicated matters. She had few opportunities to be alone, and the only time she could move about unaccompanied was at night.

When Erica appeared at last, Marie nervously motioned for her to sit on the bench with her. She began, "Uh, um, Princess Erica, there's actually something I would like to—"

"Before you say anything, I would like to ask you a question, if you don't mind," Erica said with a smile. Marie was stopped cold as she tried to fumble her way into working out the truth. "Miss Marie, would it be correct for me to assume that you reincarnated into this game?"

"Huh...?" Marie squeaked back, blindsided.

Erica placed a hand over her chest. "I am as well. I came to my senses to realize I was Erica Rapha Holfort. Technically, it would be more correct to say I didn't reincarnate here but rather that my soul took up residence in the princess's body."

"You're kidding me, right?! Why d-didn't you ever..." Marie's voice trailed off as she tried to process this new information amid the thousand fresh questions popping into her head.

If Erica was like her and Leon, then why had she left the two to their own devices for so long? Someone aware of the game's scenario should have realized something was amiss before now.

Erica seemed to read the doubts upon Marie's face. She explained, "I was quite sickly until last year. My body was in no state to go walking around. Furthermore, my father was tremendously overprotective of me and wouldn't allow me outside. In spite of these setbacks, I did hear stories of the Saint and the marquess."

Erica spoke with a maturity far beyond her years, sounding surprisingly calm and collected about the situation. She was the polar opposite of Marie, who was so shocked that she slipped right off the edge of the bench and bumped onto the ground.

"Ugh! That means I was all nervous for nothing! Okay, so how old are you actually? Lemme tell you, I may look young, but my soul's super mature. You'd better show me proper respect!" Marie huffed at the girl, eager to establish her superiority.

Erica gave her a troubled smile. "I was over sixty when I passed away and awoke here."

Marie gaped before bowing her head low. "My deepest apologies for my impertinent behavior, Madam."

"Hm? Oh, um, you needn't worry about age and the like with me. More importantly, you called me here to discuss the otome game we are trapped in, correct?"

"Oh, yeah! Um, so my Big Bro and I know next to nothing about the scenario of the third game. I was hoping if you knew anything, you could share it with us. Things are lookin' kinda bad the way they are right now." As if to emphasize their need for help, she grasped Erica's hand.

Erica's eyes widened in surprise, but she didn't draw her hand away. "I suspected Marquess Bartfort was another reincarnation case, but are you implying that the two of you were related before you came here?"

"Sure were! We both reincarnated here. Probably because I forced the game

on him and made him play it. Anyway, we've both been through a lot of crap."

It was as though Marie's words had sparked a flash of inspiration. Erica urgently opened her mouth to say something, but before she could get any words out, she was interrupted by a student's booming voice.

"Oh, Sir Kniiiiight, where are yooooou? Sir Kni—" The girl's calls for her knight were abruptly cut off when she stumbled and collapsed in the darkness.

Marie and Erica rushed to the girl's side. Marie lifted her limp form into her arms to realize that the female student was Mia. Her hands clutched at her chest as if in agony. Marie used her healing magic to alleviate her pain.

"You shouldn't be out here at this hour if you're sick," Marie said tersely.

"I'm...sorry. My health hasn't...been so great lately. That's why I...was going to ask...Sir Knight for some medicine. I-I didn't think my body would give out this quickly..."

Mia must have assumed she was well enough to run around and search for her knight, only for her foolhardy actions to make her condition worse. Her speech came out in strained gasps.

Erica gently took the girl's hand in hers. "It's all right," she cooed. "Calm yourself and breathe slowly."

Mia followed her instructions and took slow gulps of air. Her breathing gradually improved, and with time, her face muscles relaxed.

"Thank goodness." Marie sighed with relief.

Strange... There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with her.

When Marie used her healing magic, she didn't sense that it had any effect—as if there was nothing to be healed. Marie initially suspected that the girl was faking it, but the anguish on her face seemed too genuine for that. What's more, the healing magic did seem to improve her condition. It struck Marie as incredibly bizarre. She shook off the feeling for now; the important thing was that Mia was feeling better.

"Do you have some kind of chronic illness or something?" Marie asked.

She was super cheerful and always full of joy in the game, right?

The mystery of Mia's condition deepened.

"I've had these sudden bouts of pain since about last year. Nothing like this had ever happened before that. I ran around and played like a normal kid growing up."

"Interesting..."

Marie glanced at Erica. *The princess's health improved after being sickly for ages, right? Why did their positions change? Why's Mia the frail one now?*

While Marie was lost in thought, Erica asked, "This medicine that your knight possesses—is it not something you can procure from elsewhere?"

"Bravey—I mean, yes, my medicine! It's a type of medicine that Sir Knight prepared specifically for me. I've heard it can't be found anywhere else."

"Oh? Your knight must be exceptionally knowledgeable about pharmaceuticals then," Erica said, praising Hering's capabilities.

Mia's cheeks lit up. Delighted to hear someone compliment her knight, she passionately explained, "Yes, he is! Sir Knight is incredible. He's the best knight in all of the Empire! He serves as my guardian knight, though, honestly, I don't deserve someone as capable as him in the least. It's a bit of a waste, really." All traces of happiness drained from her face as she went on.

Realization hit Marie like a bolt. *Hold on. Has this girl actually fallen for her guardian knight?*

Unlike her brother, Marie was much more attuned to romance. She could tell instantly from Mia's speech patterns that she had feelings for Hering.

"Sir Knight is the kindest guy. He came all the way here to accompany me on my foreign exchange, saying he couldn't possibly leave me alone."

"For you?" Marie clarified, seizing the opportunity to pry more information out of the girl. "He didn't come here for any other objective?"

Mia frowned. She considered Marie's question for a moment before answering, "No, he hasn't told me of any other reasons."

I raced through the darkened streets of the capital.

“This way, Master,” Luxion instructed.

He had a number of drones set up throughout the city that transmitted information to one another through a system of blinking lights. Luxion read their signals and used them to guide me to the scene of the latest crime.

“That sure is an old-fashioned way of doing it,” I told him.

“Keep your complaints to yourself, if you please. Take a right at the next corner.”

I did as he advised and arrived at the scene, which had yet to be occupied by curious onlookers. We found ourselves at a cross-shaped intersection tucked in a narrow street between the buildings, slapped messily in the middle of network of similar maze-like alleyways. None of the buildings had exits facing this direction, so traffic was sparse.

Corpses were sprawled on the ground. They looked fresh, killed only moments prior. I spotted what looked like a government official surrounded by a slew of hired guards. All of them were well muscled and beefy, but fat lot of good it had done them. Most curiously, nothing at the scene suggested a struggle had taken place.

Gruesome as the scene was, what drew my eye was the shadowy silhouette of a man in the middle of it. He wore a hat and a long, brown coat. I approached. He turned to me, his eyes gleaming red.

“*Ugh... I...f-found you...Bart...fort...*”

Drool trickled down the man’s chin. His movements were jerky and unnatural, suggesting he wasn’t in control of his own body. One of his legs appeared to be lame; he dragged it behind him as he faced me. When he did so, I caught a glimpse of his stomach.

I grimaced and reached for the handgun hidden in my overcoat, aiming the barrel at him. “Whoever did this is real sick in the head.”

“Indeed. A fragment of a Demonic Suit is apparently embedded in his body. I regret to say that he is already beyond salvation.”

Those words gave me pause. I was assailed with memories of Serge and the monster he had been transformed into. As if reading my thoughts, Luxion interjected, “I will take care of him.”

“Hold on. I’d like to have some words while he has some consciousness left.”

“If you insist, then be my guest.”

A number of grotesque eyes had budded on the skin of the man’s chest. The shard embedded in his body was accompanied by three long, undulating tentacles that protruded from his split-open stomach. The tips of them formed sharp blades, covered in blood.

“Can I assume you’re our culprit? What’s your aim here, exactly?” I asked.

“Bartfort...enemy... Our...enemy... Kill...”

“Not much of a talker, huh?”

“This man is an ordinary civilian. It would be stranger if he retained any awareness after part of a Demonic Suit was inserted into his body. Moreover, it would be impossible for this one man by himself to accomplish everything we had since up to this point. It is highly likely there is a puppet master behind all of this.”

Humans who incorporated a Demonic Suit into their body weren’t long for this world. Luxion deduced accordingly that this man couldn’t have maintained this state for an entire month. It was more likely that someone else was involved, manipulating people from behind the scenes via the insertion of Demonic Suit parts.

Left with no other recourse, I said, “Then our next step is to look for this mastermind, huh?” I took aim once again with my gun, having paused briefly in the hope of an intelligible exchange. In the same instant, the man’s eyes gleamed brightly. His stomach-tentacles spooled out toward me at top speed—I pulled the trigger, and the bullet ripped right through his gut. The man collapsed forward with agonizing slowness. Having lost all steam, the tentacles slumped to the ground with him, falling well short of me. Moments later, they dissolved into black liquid and disappeared entirely. The man’s mutilated corpse was all that was left.

I heaved a big sigh, scrutinizing our culprit's face from afar. "On the bright side, we've got some clues now."

"Quite. Let's identify this man and contact any family or friends he may have for information."

"Sounds good. Man... Whoever is behind this is one sick puppy."

"Whoever is responsible can weaponize a fragment of a Demonic Suit with this level of precision, which suggests intricate knowledge. Any normal individual who foolishly attempted this kind of meddling with a Demonic Suit would be consumed and killed by it," said Luxion. As he explained it, a Demonic Suit would drain its victim dry—of mana, of blood, of everything—leaving only an empty husk behind.

"Sounds like a cursed item."

"Not entirely correct, but close enough. Humans certainly should not meddle with one. They are abominable weapons."

"Anyway... We'd better search the body for hints about who this guy is."

As I approached the dead man's body, I suddenly sensed another presence in the darkness on the other side of him.

"Master, it appears our mastermind was closer than we anticipated."

"You got that right."

The man, who seemed equally wary of me, stepped closer to reveal himself. He had striking silver hair. I recognized him at once as the guardian knight Hering. He gave the man I'd shot a brief glance before his eyes fixed on me and the gun in my hand. A wrinkle of blatant, undisguised disgust formed in his brow. "What's your aim here?"

The question was incredibly vague, but my rough interpretation was that he was grilling me on why I was chasing down the serial killer. But his intent didn't matter. I turned my gun on him.

"Don't move," I warned. "I'm the one asking the questions here. In fact, I've got a laundry list of things I wanna ask—"

"Master!" Luxion flew in front of me, deploying a barrier in front of me.

Several electric charges collided with it a split second later, each repelled blast emitting a blinding light.

Hering hadn't moved an inch, though his eyes went wide in surprise at Luxion's sudden appearance. More pressing was the ominous, black spherical object floating behind him. It was the same exact size and shape as Luxion, with a red eye to match. The similarities ended there; this thing, whatever it was, resembled a living being more than it did a robot. The material it was made out of was a mystery, but its eye looked decidedly organic.

"Partner," spoke a strange voice. I assumed it belonged to the bizarre creature, "I'm afraid our bad premonition was right on the mark. The Scumbag Knight has a weapon left behind by the old humans at his side."

Luxion beat me to a reply, his voice dripping with hostility and hatred. "Never did I dream that we would find a Demonic Suit's core completely intact. This thing is the very epitome of evil and should be exterminated posthaste. Master, I request permission to deploy my main body."

The black object—for lack of anything better to call it at this point—raised a tiny hand. It clenched its fingers into a tight fist as it screamed back, "Who are you calling evil, you stupid lump of metal?! You're far more nefarious than us! Your existence carries no meaning at all! Partner, don me immediately! We mustn't allow this thing and its Master to draw another breath!" The outburst turned his grotesquely human eye bloodshot. Thorns blossomed all over his body, rippling and billowing. It seemed he could change his shape at will.

"No other choice, I guess. Kurosuke!"

"You got it!"

Hering thrust out his right hand toward me, and the black object—Kurosuke—morphed into a liquid which wrapped itself around him and formed bat-like wings at his back.

"He looks like a demon," I commented.

"This is no time for jokes, Master. This is a perfectly intact Demonic Suit. We should fall back and rendezvous with Arroganz before proceeding."

"Are they gonna let us?" Though I posed the question, I indulged him and

spun around to dash madly in the opposite direction. The labyrinthine streets worked to my advantage.

“Hold it right there!” Hering shouted after me, giving chase.

I cast a glance over my shoulder, then fired my gun back at him. The bullets found their mark, but they were deflected.

“I took aim at any part of him that was exposed and it’s still no use!” I grumbled. Even Luxion’s specially crafted gun was no match for Hering in his current state.

“He is erecting a barrier in front of his body to block your attacks. Further fire is pointless. I have repeatedly asked you to carry more powerful weapons on hand.”

I shoved my gun back in its holster and kept running. “Oh please,” I snapped back. “If I waltzed around with a rifle or shotgun on me, they’d have me arrested!”

The police would never let me get away with carrying a weapon out in the open like that. I’d be in handcuffs in seconds. Worst of all, Roland would get a kick out of it.

I darted down one of the alleyways and spotted a wooden box up ahead. I leaped on top of it, using the added height to help propel me to the roof—I landed there and continued racing according to Luxion’s directions.

Hering, meanwhile, had taken to the sky with his bat wings. He gazed down at me from on high.

“Must be nice, swooping around in the air like that. Luxion, get me an upgrade like that. Fix me up,” I said.

“What a lucky AI I am. My master can crack wise in the most dire situations imaginable,” Luxion retorted sarcastically. His red lens flickered as he glared.

The fused Hering and Kurosuke called after us as they pursued.

“I must ask you something,” said the guardian knight. “but I suppose I’ll have to immobilize you first.”

“And before we bother with any questions, let’s destroy that rotten AI he’s

got with him!” Kurosuke demanded.

Kurosuke and Luxion’s hatred was mutual. As weapons of two opposing sides of humanity, they’d resumed their eons-old feud in the present without sacrificing any of the intensity.

“Sorry to break it to you, but you’re the one who’s gonna get immobilized.” I yanked my gun from its holster and fired it at him. Hering made no attempt to move out of the way, certain from prior experience that my bullets couldn’t harm him.

“Pointless. Your handgun can’t—”

Luxion interrupted him. “You’re the unfortunate one here. We will destroy all trace of the garbage that the new humans left in their wake. Right here, right now.”

In the next instant, Arroganz appeared to body slam Hering and send him tumbling through the air. It came to rest on the rooftop where I was standing, and the cockpit popped open. I clambered inside and yanked the hatch shut in seconds. Good timing—a fraction of a second later, an electric charge collided with the outside of the hatch, causing Arroganz to shake and sway.

“Whoa, that was close!”

Cold sweat ran down my back. I grabbed the control sticks and guided Arroganz into the air.

“Master, let’s lift all restrictions on our heavy weapons,” Luxion suggested. My guy was desperate to turn Kurosuke to ash come hell or high water.

“Do you lose all sense of reason when it comes to Demonic Suits or what? We’re in the capital, remember? No way we can use weapons like that here. And you’d better not use your main body unless absolutely necessary.”

“I deem the loss of the capital an acceptable sacrifice if it means getting rid of that *thing* completely.”

Luxion continued his vain attempts to persuade me, but I ignored him to focus on the monitor. The black liquid had swallowed up Hering’s body and morphed into the Demonic Suit form I’d grown most accustomed to seeing. The only way

it differed from the others I'd seen was its lack of creepy, lifelike eyes. This one resembled an ordinary Armor with bat wings at its back and a long reptilian tail. Bathed in the moonlight, it held an eerie beauty.



“I knew it looked familiar. I can’t believe it. It’s Brave,” I said.

The Armor’s gleaming eyes narrowed. “How come you know Kurosuke’s name?”

Hering didn’t wait to hear my answer. He charged. He was far faster than any other Demonic Suit we had faced to date. Sweat poured down my forehead. His sharp claws only grazed Arroganz’s outer plating, but this was unlike my clashes with other opponents. His attack left visible scratches behind.

“You gotta be kidding me. He carved right through Arroganz’s plating.”

“Need I remind you that this is a real Demonic Suit? I have successfully collated the information in my database with what battle data I have recorded from our opponent thus far. Minor discrepancies aside, I can tell you with certainty that this Demonic Suit is a Named One. As you said yourself moments ago, it is called Brave.”

This Named One caused monumental damage to the old humans during the war, hence why the name remained in Luxion’s data from the time.

“Wow, super reassuring to hear that!” I grumbled.

I pushed Arroganz’s thrusters to the max so I could outpace Hering and dodge his attacks. His Armor suddenly stopped moving as it formed two balls of crackling electricity in the palms of its hands. Once they took a solid shape, he pitched them at me. I swerved to avoid them. The electric orbs swerved with me, continuing their pursuit.

“Seriously? Homing capabilities?”

“The precision of these far outmatch the other Demonic Suits we have faced,” Luxion commented. “I will fire an anti-magic flare.”

A flash of light fired from Arroganz’s backpack as the flares were released. The orbs immediately gave chase; when they collided, an explosive impact rocked the sky. It was like a fireworks display. From my monitor, I saw that the civilians below were gazing up at the scene.

“It’s dangerous to keep fighting here,” I said.

I considered leading Hering away from the capital, but he was intent on

capturing me.

“I won’t let you get away!” he hollered.

“Girls don’t like guys who don’t know when to back off.”

I was tossing out a wisecrack, but when Hering replied, he sounded deadly serious. “That is not an issue for me.”

Ooh, that got under my skin. I squeezed the control sticks in my hands.

“Trying to tell me you’re so handsome that you’ve never had any girl troubles, huh? Just you wait. I’m gonna wipe the floor with you!”

As that fight was beginning, Gabino was busy assembling the rest of his subordinates who had snuck their way into the capital. He studied the face of the pocket watch in his hand until, at last, it ticked over to the appointed hour. He snapped the lid shut and lifted his gaze.

“It’s time. Those dissatisfied with the status quo, those biding their time, will finally take up arms to throw the capital into chaos. We’ll make use of this opportunity to fulfill our own objectives.”

He and his followers were gathered in the capital’s warehouse district. The Ladies of the Forest and the other organizations he had contacted had prepared a warehouse for him—this was where he had stationed troops flown in from Rachel. To obscure their association with the Holy Kingdom, each man had donned a disguise to resemble an air pirate.

The walls around them were covered in wanted posters with Leon’s photo. Every single one was defaced with graffiti, torn into tatters, or both.

“Our plan was for this widespread upset to draw out the Scumbag Knight, but he’s already locked in battle with another it seems. This unexpected turn of events changes nothing. We shall commence with our strategy!”

Each man saluted the end of Gabino’s speech. Then they hurried out of the building en masse to carry out their assigned tasks.

Gabino’s eyes narrowed; his smile stretched correspondingly wide. Soon the Kingdom’s capital would be swallowed in a sea of flames.

“How delightful it is that your fellow countrymen invited us here, Scumbag Knight. We’ll be sure to cause as many casualties as possible. All that we do, we do for the Holy Kingdom of Rachel.”

No sooner did he finish speaking than Gabino produced a knife from his pocket and threw it through the air. The blade stabbed into one of the wanted posters, distorting the photo of Leon’s face.

Gabino traced his fingers over the scar on his forehead. “I do so look forward to seeing your anguish, Scumbag Knight. I must repay you for leaving this mark on me.”

The sky over the capital had lit up with what looked like fireworks. As Marie watched from her position in the academy’s inner courtyard, she noticed flashes of moving lights amid the spectacle above.

“What’s Big Bro doing?!”

It was normally forbidden for anyone to battle above the capital due to the danger it presented to bystanders below. Marie could hardly believe Leon would be foolish enough to break a rule like that one, although it was a testament to how urgent their situation had become.

More lights appeared in the sky, joined by sparking balls of lightning.

Mia stared up as well. She slapped a hand over her mouth. “Sir Knight and Bravey are fighting?” Her voice was barely above a whisper, but it didn’t escape Marie’s sharp ears.

“Hold it right there. Who is this ‘Bravey’? Are you telling me that’s your guardian knight up there?” Marie demanded.

Mia shrank back. Her eyes darted back and forth as if she was trying to devise some way to shake Marie off, but Marie wasn’t having any of it.

“Answer me!”

“W-well, um...” Mia dropped her gaze.

“Pressing her so forcefully will only frighten her,” Erica intervened.

“Look, I’m in a hurry! And if this girl’s knight is behind all this, we’ve gotta stop things before they get really serious!”

Mia’s chin jerked up. She couldn’t stand by while her precious knight’s reputation was besmirched. “Sir Knight isn’t behind anything!” she shouted back at Marie. “He’s a kind person. He wouldn’t fight without good reason.”

Mia’s strong belief in her knight was unfortunately matched by Marie’s conviction that Leon wouldn’t go into battle without justification.

“So you’re saying my Big Bro is in the wrong?! Is that it, huh?!” Marie looked poised to leap at the girl at any moment.

“Please wait a moment,” Erica cut in once again, her gaze drawn back to the sky. “Something is amiss.”

An airship had appeared above the academy. It flew curiously low, and its high-powered lights illuminated the entire school. The flag it flew indicated it belonged to air pirates. Upon closer inspection Marie also noticed that they had lowered a rope from the ship via which a number of crewmen were disembarking. It only took one look to be sure: They were too organized to truly be pirates.

Marie grabbed Erica and Mia’s hands in each of hers and yanked them along, scrambling in the opposite direction. “This way!”

Gabino, clad in his usual suit and habitually studying his pocket watch, issued commands on the airship flying over the academy. Once he had confirmed the time, he turned back to his soldiers. “Secure our highest-priority targets before the Scumbag Knight reaches us. Time permitting, you should take custody of the lower priority targets as well, but that is not our main objective.” With a depraved grin, he added, “If you cannot capture them, you may kill them. We are pirates, after all.”

He gazed through the window of the bridge down at the academy below, watching his comrades move according to his orders. His soldiers ignored the main school building and instead rushed the dormitories. The staff they’d used to infiltrate the school had fed them precise intel on their targets’ daily

schedule, and so Gabino's men wasted no time with aimless searching. Their primary targets were Leon's fiancées.

"Do whatever you must to take his future brides into custody. I want Alzer's Priestess at the bare minimum. She can serve other purposes besides serving as a hostage."

"Understood, sir," said the subordinate standing immediately behind Gabino. That man then turned to relay those orders to the rest of his fellow soldiers. "You heard him. Go forth and teach that detestable Scumbag Knight what it means to invoke Rachel's fury!"

Leon had earned their resentment during his subjugation of the attempted coup d'état in the Alzer Republic. The Holy Kingdom of Rachel was working alongside the rebel army and, as such, had incurred enormous losses when it failed. Worse yet, they were forced to surrender when Leon took the commander of their fleet hostage. It was humiliating. Gabino himself was drawn into the fray where he sustained a scar on his forehead. He had his own personal vendetta with Leon because of it, but even without that level of investment, Leon could not be permitted to live after the dishonor he had caused Rachel.

The above events led to the formation of a strategy to take Leon's fiancées captive as hostages, and that strategy was well underway. Gabino and his men intended to cause innumerable casualties to Holfort Kingdom, but their true desire was to hit Leon where it hurt the most. Rachel regarded him as such a threat that they willingly resorted to these means.

The soldiers on the ground gave a signal to the airship, indicating the battle was unfolding as they had anticipated. Gabino turned his gaze to the Scumbag Knight who was busy fighting a different opponent in the distance. All they needed to do was take Leon out of the picture, and then the success of their mission was guaranteed.

"Your women will soon be in my hands, Scumbag Knight."

The soldiers, disguised as air pirates, broke through the entrance of the girls' dormitory with practiced coordination.

“Way too easy.”

“We’re up against a buncha brats, whaddaya expect?”

“I don’t care how brawny these Holfortians are. I ain’t scared of some schoolkids.”

The soldiers stormed inside in quick succession. Despite their caution, it wasn’t long before bullets began hailing down on them. They rushed to the shadows to hide from the barrage, baffled. A vase in the hall shattered. One of the soldiers took a hit and collapsed to the ground, groaning in agony.

“Rubber bullets? They’re treatin’ this like a joke!”

Although less threatening than real bullets, this nonlethal ammunition had enough momentum behind it that anyone who got hit was down for the count. The soldiers would need to be careful as they progressed.

The squadron leader motioned to the rest of the men. They began their counter-assault from the shadows. They had rifles to combat enemy fire, but this enemy wasn’t leaving a single gap in their attack. The soldiers, with their relatively slow guns, were at a serious disadvantage. The guns they possessed couldn’t rapid-fire like that.

“How can they keep unloading on us so fast? Is this some kinda new rifle they’re using?”

These troops were aware of the existence of machine guns. Left with no other means to turn the tide of battle, the leader reached for his hand grenade. The firing stopped. The leader of the troop paused to glance back at his men. After a round of mutual nods, he tossed his grenade. The moment it made contact with the floor, smoke spewed out to fill the air. Anyone without the requisite training would find it difficult to keep their eyes open. The leader and his men covered their mouths and noses with cloth, squinting through the sting of the smoke on their eyes as they proceeded forward. The whole troop was certain that the enemy had been incapacitated. There was no way they could see anything that was happening around them.

“All right. You men, go on ahead and—”

Right as the leader attempted to order his troops to charge, a flurry of

footsteps echoed around them. A woman wearing a strange mask stood before them. She had a gun in her hands unlike any gun they'd ever seen before. She trained its barrel upon the squadron leader, and without missing a beat, she pulled the trigger. A flurry of rubber bullets sprayed into the man. He wouldn't die from his wounds, but the impact was powerful enough that the pain bypassed muscle and sinew all the way to his bones. His troop struggled to withstand the agony.

Once the woman confirmed that the soldiers were out of commission, she began giving orders of her own. "Take their weapons from them and tie them up."

The squadron leader struggled to lift his head from where he was collapsed on the floor, hoping to get a glimpse of their attacker. The smoke was already beginning to dissipate. When the girl removed her mask, he saw her braided, golden-blond hair and dark crimson eyes. Her sharp, well-defined facial features spoke of her strength of will.

"You're one of our targets!" the squadron leader gasped in disbelief.

Angie glanced at the man briefly before firing on him and rendering him unconscious.

As soon as she removed her gas mask, Angie wiped away the sweat that had formed on her brow. The female students around her cowered even as they followed her instructions to tie up the fallen men. Angie took the opportunity to remove the magazine from her machine gun, at which point a number of armed worker robots drifted over to her.

"They're bold, I'll give them that—attacking the academy like this," said Angie.

The robots, which were compact enough to maneuver in the tight corridors of the dormitory, spread out around her to closely monitor the surroundings. Angie watched them and smiled to herself.

"Guess Leon predicted this perfectly, hm?"

Angie was simultaneously exasperated at her future groom's zeal for

preparations and grateful for it. Leon seemed cavalier about these things, but in fact, he had assembled various things so that the plan went off without a hitch.

One of the robots offered her a full magazine to replace her old one, which she gladly accepted.

“These men are too organized to be ordinary air pirates. Deirdre’s information must be correct.”

The moment that woman’s name left her lips, Angie scrunched her face. This show of displeasure was short-lived, giving way to a hardened expression when cries began echoing from elsewhere in the dormitory. She turned her head toward the direction of the noise, but she soon realized it was the hoarse yelps of men reverberating through the halls.

She let out a small sigh. “That’s the direction Noelle went, isn’t it?”

Noelle was in her room, slipping her arms through the jacket of her school uniform. She grumbled to herself under her breath even as she prepared to leave.

“It’s obvious they’ve got some insiders helping out, for them to come straight to my room like this.” She paused. “Still... This sure is incredible...”

The air pirates had stormed into her room mere moments ago. The crest on the back of her right hand lit up—plant roots and branches burst forth from all corners of the room, ensnaring her would-be attackers. Ivy wound itself around each of the soldiers and their weapons, rendering them powerless and immobile. Noelle had accomplished all of this purely through the power of her Priestess’s crest; their still-immature Sacred Tree had interceded to protect her. The intruders were dispatched before she so much as lifted a finger.

Cleare appeared in the doorway with a number of other robots at her back. “Figured this would happen,” she said as she scanned the room. “Dang, though. You sure went wild in here.”

Noelle gaped. “I-I didn’t do any of this!”

“I know that! The issue is the repair fees for your room. This is gonna cost a

pretty penny.”

Noelle’s once opulent room was engulfed in plants. Greenery pierced the floor and left bulging cracks in the walls. The scope of the immense damage now apparent, Noelle clutched her head. “Sacred Tree, show a little more restraint, would ya?!”

“It’s fine. I’ll make Master cover the costs,” Cleare assured her.

Noelle was grateful for the Sacred Tree’s protection. Truly, she was. But the fact remained that its protection had caused immense damage to the building.

At that same time, Marie dragged Mia and Erica behind her as she ran from the air pirates.

“This way! Hurry!”

Mia clutched at her chest, unable to keep pace. Whatever pain she was in was so immense that she was forced to wrest her hand from Marie’s. “I-I can’t do it,” she said. “Go on without me...please.”

Erica doubled back and grabbed Mia. She tugged her along next to her. “We cannot leave you. Please, make haste.”

“It’s fine. I’ll only drag the two of you down,” Mia insisted.

Infuriated by her insistence that they abandon her, Marie roared, “Shut up already and quit playing martyr! I’ll carry you on my back if your legs give out.” She was about to hoist Mia onto her back as promised when a gunshot echoed around them. All three girls froze in place.

They looked up to see a young man in work clothes. He discarded his hat, revealing blond hair and a vulgar smile.

“Found you, Princess.”

Erica stepped in front of Marie and Mia. “It’s me you are after?”

“You got it. You’re gonna be our bargaining chip. So come along with me—to correct this corrupt Kingdom.” He spoke with zero regard for her royal status.

Marie realized then that she’d seen this man before. “Correct what, exactly?”

she demanded. “No one asked you!”

“Cram it, fake Saint. You’re good buddies with Leon, yeah? Hate to break it to you, but he ain’t coming to your rescue this time.”

This was the rude new staff recruit she’d spotted on the day of the opening ceremony.

Marie gritted her teeth. *That was around the time the Demonic Suit appeared and interfered with Luxion and Cleare’s intel-gathering abilities... Why’d a sleazeball have to sneak into the school now, of all times?*

She scrutinized the man, cursing how unlucky they had been. Unfortunately, her situation only grew more dire—a number of air pirates caught up and surrounded them. This man had brought allies.

“Tie the three of them up,” the man instructed.

“Sucks to be taking orders from you, but sure. I guess we’ll do as you ask.”

The armed air pirates approached Marie’s group. The echo of a gunshot split through the air, and one of the men was hit in the side. He collapsed, his face contorted in pain as he clutched at his wound. The other pirates aimed their guns and fired in the direction the shot had originated. More bullets sprayed out from the darkness, striking one man after another and incapacitating them.

“Eeeek!” squealed the terrified worker as he scuttled away.

“Don’t you dare run!” some of the remaining pirates called after him. He ignored them altogether. As the pirates’ number thinned, a group of men jumped out from the shadows.

The anxiety clutching at Marie in a death grip finally loosened its hold completely once she saw their faces. “Boys!”

“Keep your head down, Marie!”

Julius opened fire on the last of the pirates who were still standing. He used rubber bullets; his shots didn’t pierce the men’s skin. Those who were struck were nonetheless left writhing on the ground in agony.

Greg clobbered one of the pirates with his spear, while Chris charged a different pirate with his sword to knock the man’s gun from his hand. Chris

landed a punch in the man's jaw, rendering him unconscious. One pirate thrust a hand out and erected a barrier to block him and his fellows from further attacks, but Brad used his own magic to shape the earth beneath their feet into a human arm which snatched up the enemy caster, binding him in place. The final few stragglers attempted to race over, hoping to take Marie and the other girls hostage, but Jilk's sharp aim caught them in the stomachs. They were downed on impact.

"Y-you guys saved our necks!" Marie's legs gave out. She crumpled to the ground.

Julius strode over to her and rested a hand on her shoulder. "Apologies for the wait." He was smiling, clearly relieved to see her safe.

"It's fine. I'm just glad you made it in time."

Erica, whom Julius had wholly ignored up until this point, interrupted, "Elder Brother, how much do you know of our current situation?"

She was trying to get a feel for what was happening, but Julius regarded her with reproach. "Hm? I believe fighting persists at the student dormitory, but I don't know much about the particulars. We hurried here so we could save Marie."

"A-are you sure that's wise? Wouldn't the students be more unified if you were there to lead them?"

"It's a bit late for me to ask as a leader. Besides, they're perfectly capable of handling things for themselves. If we should be focusing on our attention on anything, it would be the enemy ship. Now then... How are we going to handle this?"

Everyone's eyes moved to the airship hovering above the academy.

Gabino knitted his brows as he listened to the flood of incoming reports. With each glance at the face of his pocket watch, he sighed.

"This is taking too long."

"My deepest apologies. I thought I had chosen our best for this mission," said

the ship's captain. He fumed at his subordinates' incompetence.

"I suppose they are a band of powerful, barbarous knights...even if they are merely students."

Foreign countries overwhelmingly viewed Holfort Kingdom's knights as fearless warriors. Their academy students were forced to venture into the depths of dungeons as part of the school's curriculum. This grueling education made for more formidable fighters and earned Holfort's students a favorable reputation abroad.

Unable to waste any more time on this endeavor, Gabino called for a strategy update. "If we cannot capture them, then let's kill them instead. His Eminence, our great king, desires retribution."

This was the next best way to teach the Scumbag Knight a lesson, failing the capture of his fiancées.

The captain faced his men. "Prepare the cannons!"

The ship rotated to face the dormitory with one of its sides. Windows opened and cannon barrels were inserted through them. Workers promptly loaded the ammunition and took aim.

On the bridge, Gabino snapped the lid of his pocket watch shut. "Fire."

Every cannon unloaded on the dormitory at once. The recoil was vicious enough to rock the entire ship. Everyone on board, Gabino included, was certain that the battle was over, until one of the men peering through a window shouted, "O-our rounds hit, but they were intercepted! How...?! Jeez, that barrier is enormous!"

The confused man's report had everyone gaping in disbelief. The very same moment that they attacked, a dome-shaped barrier flew up around the dormitory to block every single one of their shots.

Gabino's hand clenched around the pocket watch as he roared, "Continue firing!"

Livia stood on the rooftop of the dormitory with her hands spread wide. A

chain with a white gemstone accessory dangled from her right wrist, where it glinted with faint light. Livia had produced the protective barrier which protected the building. She was surrounded by a number of floating robots that acted as sentries.

An endless barrage of cannon fire pelted the barrier as the airship continued its onslaught, but not one of them made it through.



Had this been her first year at the academy, Livia would have instantly run out of mana deploying a barrier of this size. It came much easier to her now. It was a strain to be sure, but she would not pass out from the exertion.

The enemy refused to let up. They fired round after round after her, but Livia confidently withstood their assault.

“It’s pointless. You’ll run out of ammunition before I run out of mana.” Having calculated how much ammunition a ship of that size could carry, she was certain she could outlast them even if they brought in an extra ship or two as assistance.

Livia’s mind wandered back to the way she once was—timid and unable to do anything herself, only causing trouble for those around her. *I was so useless. All I did was drag Mr. Leon down. But things are different now. I can be of use!*

She held her arms out on either side, at shoulder level, and gradually moved them in front of her. The motion forced the dome to swell even larger, enveloping more of the school grounds than it had before.

“I won’t allow you to do any more damage here,” Livia said.

Chapter 6:

The Strongest Knight

“HE’S GOT cheat stats too?!” I cursed under my breath from Arroganz’s cockpit as I gave chase to Hering’s Demonic Suit.

I was reminded of an old adversary: the Black Knight. He appeared way back in the first installment of the game, and his strength in battle was nothing short of cheat-tier. In the end, the Demonic Suit fragment he’d incorporated into his body consumed him, turning him into a monster that attacked the Kingdom. That old fart had tons of motivations—loyalty, revenge, and what have you. He was also the most fearsome opponent I faced up until that point. Back then, even with the advantage I possessed through Luxion, I wondered if I might die in the process of battling him.

Memories of the Black Knight were bubbling back up in my mind because the Empire’s guardian knight was shaping up to be an even fiercer foe. Arroganz’s performance was even more impressive than in that first-year battle, but it was practically in shambles facing a real Demonic Suit like this.

“Luxion, missiles!”

“Firing missiles. I regret to inform you, Master, that we have no more left after that.”

The hatch on Arroganz’s backpack opened, unleashing six cylinder-shaped missiles. Hering reacted by manifesting a longsword in his right hand. The air around it crackled with lightning, indicating it was imbued with magic.

“You don’t honestly mean to tell me he plans to cut through the missiles with —”

I didn’t have time to finish. Hering unleashed the magic in his blade, discharging electricity through the air around him. He slashed the empty air with his glowing, yellow sword, creating a concentrated wave of electrical energy that rippled outward. All of the missiles exploded before reaching him.

“He can do AoE attacks with that thing too?! Are you freakin’ kidding me?”

I never dreamed a Demonic Suit with a fully intact core would be this much of a pain in the ass. I suspected it would be strong, yes, but some part of me figured the Black Knight would blow it out of the water. I could kick myself for being so naive.

Icy sweat trickled down my forehead.

“No missiles remain,” Luxion reported. “You have already relinquished your rifle, machine-gun, battle axe, and scythe. All of the drones were destroyed too. The only weapon left is your sword, Master.”

“Yeah, well, getting into close combat with that clown sounds like a real fun way to die.” I pulled my sword out even as I complained. I couldn’t see myself winning against Hering with it.

“This is no time for jests.”

“Who’s jesting? I’m seri—whoa!”

I was in the middle of a customary retort when Hering suddenly bore down on me, bringing his longsword crashing through the air. I dodged the blow and propelled myself higher into the air with Hering hot on my tail. He spread his bat wings wide and fired a beam of electrical energy from his fingertip.

“You handle him!” I barked at Luxion.

“Assuming control to make evasive maneuvers.”

I left partial control of Arroganz to Luxion so he could dodge the incoming attacks. One of the beams managed to graze Arroganz’s shoulder even so, and it melted clean through the outer plating.

“What the—electricity can *melt* things?!”

“It is not naturally occurring electricity, it is a manifestation of his magic—emergency evasive maneuvers!” Luxion’s thorough explanation of Hering’s battle moves was cut woefully short. Alas, Hering wasn’t giving us long enough to counter, let alone hold an academic lecture.

I checked the rear camera feed. Hering had created numerous large balls of electrical energy which dotted the air around him. When he unleashed them,

they came chasing after Arroganz. Dodging them did little good; they acted like homing missiles that changed course to pursue us wherever we went. But we couldn't afford for such powerful attacks to hit us either. Arroganz was powerful, but it couldn't withstand multiple hits of that strength.

"Master, I request permission to access my main body. I must warn you that even should you refuse, I will prioritize your safety and commence my attack anyway."

I gritted my teeth. "Let's say your main body *can* defeat the Demonic Suit. What'll happen to the capital?"

"It will sustain no small number of casualties."

"Then absolutely not...is what I'd like to say, but you already promised you wouldn't listen. If you're gonna insist on betraying my orders, at least stick with me 'til the end."

"What are you planning?"

"The same thing as always!"

I switched directions, vaulting Arroganz toward Hering, and then I accelerated. Hering raised his longsword to meet me in close combat, not the least bit concerned by my change in attack plan. We closed the distance between us, and I brought my sword hand winging down toward him. Hering's magic-imbued blade had no trouble searing straight through mine. He seemed confident in his imminent victory. He swung his longsword in a large arc before bringing its point in line with Arroganz's chest, where I sat locked inside the cockpit.

"It's over," he said.

Oh, how I grateful I was for his naivety.

"Eat dirt!"

I slammed my right fist against Hering's chest. This would normally be a powerful blow, but the Demonic Suit sustained no damage at all. Hering assumed this was my last desperate attempt to resist him. He was mistaken.

Red light enveloped Arroganz's right hand and sent a full power shock wave

blasting into the Demonic Suit.

“Impact,” Luxion said.

The Demonic Suit was sent hurtling backward through the air. Soon after, it lost momentum and plunged down toward the capital. Hering had lost consciousness, I assumed—his orbs erupted in an explosion of electricity before dissipating completely. Alas, since his Demonic Suit still held its shape, I sensed my attack had less of an impact than I’d hoped.

“I hit him with everything I’ve got, and he’s still not down for the count?!”

Panic and fear gripped me all at once. Never before had Arroganz’s shock wave attack failed to reduce an opponent to ash—or at least caused a devastating blow that knocked them out of the running. My attack had landed, thankfully, but there was no telling when Hering would regain consciousness and come back for more.

I went to accelerate toward Hering for a follow-up attack but slammed to a halt. Out of the corner of my monitor screen I could see a flash of light. I turned in that direction to get a better look and realized that a faint barrier of light had enveloped part of the academy. *That’s Livia’s power!*

“The hell’s going on over there?!”

Luxion attempted to confirm the situation, but his message was delayed due to the Demonic Suit’s interference.

“It appears riots are erupting across the capital. A group, suspected to be a band of air pirates, has invaded the academy.”

I sucked in a breath. “We’re going back. Now.”

“We cannot do that.”

I almost saw red for a moment. Then I realized what Luxion was referring to and leaped back. A shock wave of electric energy split the air where I had stood only a second prior.

A crack had formed in the surface of Hering’s suit, but he was maneuvering the thing just fine.

“You are *way* too freakin’ durable.”

“I ought to say the same thing to you,” he said, though his voice was strained by his erratic breathing. My attack had done a number on him. “But you are using that AI to commit murders, so I have no choice other than to stand against you. For Mia’s sake.”

“Cut the crap!” I snapped back at him. “You’re the one pulling the strings behind the scenes. You’ve been jamming fragments of a Demonic Suit into those people and having them assassinate others!”

“I beg your pardon? I have done no such thing.”

While we were busy bickering, another voice interrupted us—Kurosuke. “Partner, there’s trouble back at the academy! An airship is invading the school grounds!”

“Wh-what?!” Hering demanded, even as he held his longsword at the ready to fend off my potential attacks.

“Mia could be in danger! We need to hurry!” Kurosuke warned.

“I know! But I’m in no condition to turn my back on this guy.”

I may not have taken him down completely, but I had caused substantial damage. I drew in a deep breath and offered, “Hey, let’s make a deal. I wanna get back to the academy as quickly as I can.”

Hering stared me down, offering no immediate reply.

“Temporary truce? You’ve clearly got someone you wanna save. So do I.”

After a short pause, Hering finally lowered his weapon. “Very well. I’ll have you know, though, that I shall do as I see fit.” With that, he spread his wings out wide and started for the academy.

“Knock yourself out.” I followed his lead and made my way back toward the campus as well, only for Luxion to have a fit.

“Master, are you in your right mind? It’s inconceivable—making a deal with a Demonic Suit. They will betray us without fail!”

“You don’t know when to quit, do you? Once we’ve saved everyone, I’ll go along with whatever you say. Just put a sock in it for now.”

After a short pause, he reluctantly said, "Very well then. You had best not forgot your promise."

"We both know how my memory is, so don't hold your breath. Now, deploy Schwert."

I put the pedal to the metal and hightailed it back toward the academy. The closer we got, the better I could assess the ongoing situation.

Aboard the Holy Kingdom's ship, Gabino was beginning to sweat bullets. No matter how much cannon fire they unloaded on the dormitory, the barrier repelled all of their shots.

"Wh-what manner of being is able to deploy such a durable barrier of this magnitude? A monster?!"

The female student standing atop the dormitory roof, generating this barrier alone, truly looked like a beast in human flesh to Gabino. Her power beggared belief.

The soldier who had kept tabs on the Scumbag Knight through his binoculars suddenly shouted, "The target and another unknown Armor are fast approaching!"

"Then we are out of time." Gabino closed his eyes. After taking a few tense moments to reaffirm his convictions, he opened his eyes again and headed for the bridge's exit. Pausing to glance over his shoulder, he ordered, "Continue firing on the dormitory! I will prepare the Demonic Knight for deployment."

"Y-yes, sir! Understood, sir!"

Gabino watched for a moment as his subordinates scrambled to carry out his demands, then he turned on his heel and left. As he strolled down the corridor, he pulled a pair of black gloves over his pockets and secured them over his hands. These gloves were essential to prevent any Demonic Suit shards he touched from consuming him. He didn't fear falling victim to their influence so long as he had these.

There was a room midway between the bridge and the airship's hangar. It

was here that Gabino stopped to knock on the door. “Sir Holy Knight, your time to take the field has come,” he announced respectfully.

The door cracked open. A young man stood there, clad in the garb befitting the Holy Kingdom of Rachel’s white knight. He had bulging, toned muscles and a soft, inviting expression. His eyes were naturally narrow, and when he saw Gabino, they crinkled into a smile.

“Ah. It’s my turn to do battle at last, I see.” The tone of his voice was gentle and calm, a perfect conduit for his mild-mannered personality.

“Yes. The time has come for you to display the might of a holy knight,” Gabino responded with utmost reverence. “My humblest apologies that it had to come to this—that you should have to go out to face the enemy.”

“I do not mind. This is my duty, after all. By the way...” His narrowed eyes flew wide open and his otherwise gentle voice was veined with palpable fury. “What happened to the Scumbag Knight? Is His Eminence’s enemy still hale and whole?”

“He is,” Gabino admitted. “He approaches us as we speak.”

The young man raised his gaze up to the ceiling, placing his fist against his chest. “I should be grateful to the heavens above for granting me the opportunity to eliminate His Eminence’s enemy.”

The two arrived at the hangar to find a number of soldiers already dressed in their air pirate disguises. Every man present paused to salute the holy knight. The young man removed the upper layers of his knightly apparel and folded them neatly before he handed them to one of the soldiers.

“Please return this to His Eminence. I would be most appreciative if you would also inform him that I carried out my duty admirably.”

This young man was kind to the soldiers and a modest soul besides. And yet Gabino brought forward a fragment of a Demonic Suit and presented it to him. “I have it ready, Sir Holy Knight.”

“Then please, do as you must.” He closed his eyes.

Gabino showed no hesitation. He stabbed the sharp edge of the Demonic Suit

fragment into the young man's chest. Blood sprayed forth from his wound. The young man's eyes shot open and his jaw dropped wide, sending more blood spurting past his lips. Despite the horrific scene, his face gradually regained its calm expression.

"Oh! So this is the trial one must face in order to become a true holy knight! O knights of eld, soon I, too, shall join you as a hero—guh!"

The blood spewing from his mouth was joined by a black liquid that devoured his entire body. He transformed with painful slowness into a spike-encrusted Armor that eventually resembled a complete Demonic Suit. The most unique aspect about this man was the weapon he wielded best: a spear with a three-pronged blade at its point. He looked most dignified, holding his trident in his hand.

As impressive a figure as the holy knight cut, a Demonic Knight was fated to become a disposable pawn. The soldiers treated him with such respect and dubbed him a holy knight because he was prepared to have a fragment of the Demonic Suit lodged into his body, fully aware that it would kill him. All knights cultivated for this purpose were exceptional warriors. Each had undergone special training to properly control the fragment that would one day be inserted into their bodies. They were incomparably fearsome adversaries on the battlefield. When the fighting was done, however, their lives would end. This was how the Holy Kingdom of Rachel's holy knights operated. It was this strength of conviction and the intense discipline that Gabino and the other soldiers were so awed by.

Gabino's eyes shimmered with tears as he beheld the young man's completed transformation. "You look incredible. The most beautiful suit of Armor we have seen in recent years."

"I am pleased to hear that, but a man may only call him a holy knight so long as he fulfills his duty," said the young man, as modest now as he was before. "I will retrieve the Scumbag Knight's head and offer it before His Eminence as a prize. Now, it is time for me to make good on my word."

"Yes, sir. Open the hatch!" Gabino ordered as he gave the holy knight a salute.

Bat-like wings appeared on the holy knight's back as he leaped from the hangar and took to the air. The other soldiers shouted after him in encouragement.

Hering was impatient to return to the academy. A tendril of blood snaked down his chin as he forced the wings at his back to propel him forward, even as his entire body screamed in resistance.

"Just a little bit further, Partner," Brave said worriedly.

"I know, Kurosuke."

"My name is *Brave*! How many times do I need to tell you? You and Mia are way too mean to me. Kurosuke this, Bravey that, you're both awful!"

Hering had found it easier to call him Kurosuke when they first met, and the name had stuck ever since.

"Save Mia and I'll consider calling you Brave instead."

"Right. We need to rescue her quickly."

They were closing in on the barrier of light surrounding the academy.

"Covering this much ground with a barrier is incredible. Is this some kind of new weapon the Kingdom has developed?" Hering wondered aloud.

There were two ways of erecting a barrier like this. Generally a human utilized their magic to build one, but a device could create similar barriers if powered by a magic stone. Humans were famously incapable of maintaining large barriers, however, and using a device required an enormous number of magic stones. To use a device to protect the entire academy was practically unthinkable for the sheer number of necessary magic stones. Hering was struck speechless with shock that the academy had such a widespread barrier prepared in advance.

"You've got it wrong, Partner," Brave corrected. "It's that girl. See? There, on the roof. She's deploying this barrier all by herself." He turned his gaze in her direction, magnifying the image so Hering could better see her.

"You're joking, aren't you?! Although...I suppose it makes sense. This girl is from the first game."

“Partner, I’m afraid we must break this barrier to access the academy.”

They had no other choice but to pierce the barrier. And once the barrier was pierced, the entire thing would shatter.

“We should send her some kind of signal, maybe have her lift the barrier temporarily so that we—”

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than an intense pain racked his chest.

“Or maybe not.”

Dammit, why do my injuries have to act up now, of all times? Hering had sustained substantial damage from Arroganz’s shock wave. As the pain flared, his wings faltered, causing him to lose altitude.

“Partner?! I knew it. We should’ve killed them!”

“We have no proof of their crimes.”

“You’re being soft! Too soft, Partner! That AI is rotten to the core, I’m telling you. There’s no low he wouldn’t stoop to! That Scumbag Knight must be an underhanded and conniving scoundrel if that thing calls him ‘Master’!”

“I’m regretting how recklessly I acted.” Hering managed to land on the ground in a kneeling position. “If only I’d—” He tried to summon his remaining strength to pull himself back to his feet, but he was interrupted. Something pierced the barrier in front of him. It had held fast up until this point, but whatever broke through left an immediate crack that fractured the barrier until it dissolved into nothing.

Hering gaped for a moment, unable to digest what had just happened. A Demonic Suit landed before him before he could get his bearings.

“He’s assumed direct control of a Demonic Suit fragment,” Brave spat. “Partner, we’re dealing with one of the Holy Kingdom’s holy knights.”

Hering gritted his teeth through the pain as he glanced up at the interloper. “What are people from Rachel doing here?”

The other Demonic Suit stabbed his trident into the ground as if by way of intimidation. “I wasn’t aware any other Demonic Knight was present here,” said

the man. “And I greatly doubt that you are one of our holy knights. Tell me—who are you?”

“I could ask you the same. What did you come all the way from Rachel for?” Hering retaliated.

The other man looked displeased by his query. Unlike Hering, he was harboring a mere shard of a Demonic Suit within his body. It had already affected his mental stability.

“I am asking the questions here. Anyway, it matters not—I doubt you can put up much of a fight with how injured you are. Only a holy knight is capable of wielding a Demonic Suit. You will have to disappear and leave what is left of your Demonic Suit behind, I’m afraid.”

Hering let out a dry laugh. “Fake? What a callous thing to say. Well, Kurosuke? What do you think?”

“How dare he make light of us. Why, if my partner was at full strength right now, he’d have you broken, bloody, and limping before you could so much as blink!” Kurosuke was furious. Some upstart holy knight with a single fragment of a Demonic Suit had the audacity to look down on them as fakes? He wouldn’t stand for it.

For all his bravado, Hering was indeed too injured to move properly. Brave had sustained no small amount of damage from the skirmish himself, so he couldn’t utilize his full potential either.

The holy knight withdrew his trident from the ground and leveled it at Hering. “I shall be taking your Demonic Suit fragment.”

There was no other choice here but to go all out. Hering resolved to do just that, but before he could act, he was interrupted by a voice from above.

“Victory belongs to the swift!” Leon’s voice boomed around them. In the same instant, a number of thin, red beams rained down on the holy knight. They burned through the outer layer of his Demonic Suit, forcing him to give up on Hering and take to the skies instead.

Once in the air and able to see his opponent, the holy knight let out a deranged cry. “Scumbag Kniiiight!”

Arroganz hovered in the air, the container at its back now transformed into wings. Through the veil of darkness that still held fast over the city, the red gleam of Arroganz's visor looked all the more eerie to Hering's eyes. More terrifying was the fact that even after their intense battle, Leon had plenty of stamina left for this new battle. Not for the first time, Hering felt a crawling, cold sweat of terror shiver down his back. Being around Leon put him on edge.

"He's got something *else* up his sleeve?"

Livia looked up from where she stood on the rooftop of the dormitory to see Arroganz. It appeared moments after a Demonic Suit pierced her barrier. She pressed her right fist to her chest. The sight of Arroganz, with Schwert at its back, brought her great relief.

"Mr. Leon came," she said, her voice full of hope. Internally, she was immensely disappointed with herself. "He had to swoop to my rescue yet again."

Livia had hoped to hold out for longer, but she was glad Leon had arrived to save her. Glad...and yet vexed by her own powerlessness. She resolved then and there to try even harder from now on. She noticed Arroganz briefly glance in her direction before returning its focus to the enemy.

"It's in your hands now, Mr. Leon."

I arrived at the academy to find the number of enemy Demonic Suits had doubled. Hering was down on one knee below. The new challenger held a trident in his hand and cursed at me.

"I sure am famous, huh?"

"Your notoriety is irrelevant, Master. Let us instead annihilate these two Demonic Suits we see before us until no trace remains. My main body is stationed in the skies above the academy, ready and waiting for your order. Please give me permission to fire my main cannon!" Luxion's eager, constant babble was like an annoying bee that wouldn't stop buzzing in my ear.

“Are you stupid? If you fired your main cannon, you’d obliterate the entire school.”

“You propose, then, that we let them go?”

I maneuvered the control sticks, and an enormous sword came flying out from where Schwert was on my back. I gripped the hilt with my right hand.

“For the moment, I wanna take down the one holding that trident.” With my right hand, I turned my blade toward him, then beckoned him with my left.

The Demonic Suit took the bait. Its wings spread wide as it propelled itself up to the same altitude.

“Scumbag Knight, I will have you atone for your transgressions. You will offer your head before His Eminence!”

This Suit differed from Hering’s. Its build was more slender and colored purple.

“Great, another type of Suit. I’m getting real sick of these cores.”

His analysis on our new adversary complete, Luxion informed me, “This one is a human who has had a fragment of a Demonic Suit embedded into his body. I must assume he was subjected to a specialized training course or otherwise possesses a unique talent to be able to maneuver this well while under the Demonic Suit’s influence.”

“Yeah, think I’d pass if they offered me the chance,” I joked.

“An impressively wise decision for the likes of you, Master.”

Our snarky conversation did not go unheard by my opponent. Incensed by the implied insult, he charged at me with his trident.

“I am a holy knight! One of the chosen! I will not be cowed by such evil as you!”

A girl came darting toward Hering’s prone form, still resting on the ground below the currently unfolding battle. Marie and the others had tried to stop her, but Mia ignored them. She broke into a run the moment Livia’s barrier

faded and she caught sight of his Suit.

Marie raced after Mia, shouting, “Hold up, would you?! You should know by now that your body can’t handle being pushed past its limits like that!”

Mia didn’t so much as glance back over her shoulder. When she reached Hering, she threw her arms around his suit and on went the waterworks. “Sir Knight! How did you get so badly injured?!”

Hering’s voice cracked through the pain. “It’s dangerous here. Get back.”

“I won’t! You said you would always be by my side!”

“I’ll come back,” Hering promised, troubled by her obstinance.

Marie finally caught up. The idiot brigade followed in hot pursuit, protecting Erica as they ran. When they spotted the Demonic Suit, each one of them readied their weapons.

Greg held a rifle this time as he leaped in front of Marie and Erica. “You two, don’t get anywhere near him. We’ve dealt with his kind a number of times before when they’ve run amok. You’d better get ready to run and get outta here.”

Marie grabbed Erica by the hand and pulled her along, putting some distance between the two of them and Hering’s Demonic Suit. Even the boys edged away from him.

Mia threw herself in front of Hering, arms spread wide. “Don’t say such heartless things about my knight!”

Hering studied her for a moment. “Enough’s enough. Kurosuke, undo our transformation.”

“You sure about that, Partner?”

“It would be more dangerous to linger here. We need to evacuate the area quickly. Besides, I doubt I will be in any shape to fight for a while.”

Brave did as requested and separated from Hering. The hulking Armor-like form disappeared immediately, leaving Hering as a regular human with his clothes in tatters. Cuts covered his body—without the Suit’s interference, fresh blood flowed from them anew. Mia threw her arms around him to help prop

him up.

“Sir Knight!” Tears beaded in the edges of her eyes.

Hering stroked the top of her head and smiled. “Sorry for worrying you. We should get out of here. It’s not safe.”

“You wanna evacuate? Then come this way,” Marie said, motioning for them to follow.

Marie lent the wounded Hering her shoulder for support as she escorted their group to a shelter. *For him to get out of a battle with Big Bro and be able to walk at all is pretty incredible. I wonder if he is as strong as he lets on.*

The idiot brigade wasn’t keen on her assisting another man and made sure to voice their dissatisfaction loudly.

“What’s with that guy?” Julius grumbled.

Jilk narrowed his eyes. “Rather brazen of him to borrow her shoulder like that.”

The other three were equally disgruntled about the situation. Marie ignored all of them.

Hering frowned. “Sorry about waylaying the young lady like this, but Mia’s body is pretty frail. I don’t want to rely on her.”

Erica walked behind him, supporting Mia.

“Hey, you,” Marie said in a voice low enough that none of the others could overhear, “What’s your aim, exactly?”

“My...aim?” Hering narrowed his eyes.

Marie sensed that he had thrown his guard up. “Try anything funny, and those five boys will leap into action. Mia’s important to you, yeah?”

Hering averted his gaze.

Marie found his response a bit strange. Nevertheless, she assured him, “I’m not gonna do anything. I just really wanna know why you’re doing this. What’d you come to the Kingdom for?” She was referring to the serial killings, albeit

subtly. Marie suspected he was involved, much as Leon had. Hering wasn't acting at all how she expected.

"I'm here for Mia. She was never this frail before. This kingdom holds the only key to saving her, so I followed her here."

"Sure, but then why bother doing this other stuff?"

"What 'other stuff'?"

Left with no other choice but to be blunt, Marie said, "The serial killings in the capital. You've got a hand in that, don't you?" Leon had mentioned to her how suspicious it was for Hering to repeatedly show up at the scene of the crime. If that weren't enough to doubt him, then his use of a Demonic Suit certainly was.

"I was just investigating them. That's all." He sounded shocked by the accusation.

"Say what?"

Marie's surprise was short-lived. A thud echoed behind them, indicating someone had collapsed. The two peered over their shoulders to find Erica slumped over on the ground, unable to support Mia any longer.

Hering tore free of Marie's grasp and raced over to Mia. Brave manifested beside him and instructed, "Mia, inhale this. Slowly, now." He emitted some red particles—

Demonic Essence—and as soon as Mia breathed them in, the color began to return to her pale face.

"Thank you, Bravey," she said.

"My name is Brave, not Bravey! I'll let it go this time, but you *must* start calling me by my proper name. Come on, I'm begging you!"

"But Bravey is so much cuter!" Mia smiled through the pain.

Hering's face relaxed, seeing that the danger had passed.

Are these guys really evil? Marie was beginning to second guess herself. The boy and his Demonic Suit certainly didn't look villainous.

Erica was the next one to double over in pain. She pressed a hand over her

mouth, struggling to breathe. Julius hurried to her side and stroked her back. “Erica?! Are you still unwell?”

Erica shook her head. “No, I’m all right... It was just a momentary flash. I’m a little out of shape. Nothing more than that, Elder Brother.”

“If you’re sure.”

Jilk made his way over to the two. “Your Highness, the battle over at the dormitory appears to be winding down. Shall we continue to the palace as planned?”

Julius raised his gaze to the skies above them. The enemy airship had exhausted its cannon ammunition and was retreating. “Good question. Considering all the fuss outside the campus, I think we should go ahead and make our way to—”

Right as they were discussing their next destination, Angie and the others emerged from the girls’ dormitory with Cleare in tow. The AI began screaming at the top of her (non-existent) lungs the moment she spotted Brave.

“Nooooooooooo! Everyone, get away from that thing!”

Everyone jumped at the volume of her voice. A number of robots assembled in the area to point their weapons at Brave. Fearing that a battle would break out if she didn’t intervene, Marie threw herself in front of Cleare.

“Wait! We don’t have to fight right now.”

“Rie? Yes, I understand.”

“That’s a serious relief, Cleare.” Marie’s shoulders visibly sagged as her tension lifted, but her joy didn’t last long. Marie underestimated the depths of the AIs’ hatred for Demonic Suits.

“I understand...that they have deceived you, but you’ve got nothing to worry about. I’ll rid you of their evil influence right away!”

The robots’ eyes gleamed ominously as they readied their guns.

“I knew you AIs were incorrigible!” Brave hissed. He had adopted a battle stance of his own. “There’ll be no finding any common ground with them!”

“Will you knock it off, you idiots?!” Angie appeared from nowhere and clubbed Cleare with the butt of her machine gun.

“M-meanie! I was just trying to protect everyone from this enemy of humanity!” Cleare whined.

“We’re going to rush the palace. Fires have broken out all around the capital.” Angie’s choice of destination was informed by her desire to get a better understanding of their current situation.

Though reluctant to comply, Cleare did so, albeit with an acidic parting barb. “But just you wait. Once Master gets back, I swear I’m gonna reduce that thing to smithereens!” The blue lens at the center of her body focused on Brave. She had not given up on destroying him.

Angie sighed. “Check that all the students are safe first. You should be able to do that much right now, no?”

“Of course I can do that mu—hm? Uh, what’s this? Oh dear!” Cleare went silent before revolving madly around the area in a strange emotional display that had everyone quirking their brows. Something had to be amiss, given how Cleare’s voice trembled. “I can’t find Fin.”

Angie’s hand flew up to shield her eyes so she could stare at the sky above. Leon was still duking it out with that Demonic Suit, putting some distance between himself and the academy in the process.

“It is my duty as a holy knight to vanquish any of the Holy Kingdom’s foes!”

I engaged the trident-wielding Demonic Suit while provoking him into following me away from the academy. Schwert, currently docked on Arroganz’s back, emitted guided lasers one after the other. Arcs of light zipped through the air and crashed into the Demonic Suit, searing its surface and turning the purple outer layer red. These attacks had melted away some of my opponent’s defenses, but they weren’t dealing substantial damage. Weirdly, I didn’t feel the same level of grim resolve that I had during my skirmish with Hering.

“So we’ve had fire, ice, and lightning so far... What magic does purple symbolize? I’m guessing wind or earth?”

I was only trying to predict what long-range attacks our enemy had in store, but Luxion was irritated at my attitude. Big surprise. He never missed an opportunity to criticize me.

“Might you consider taking this fight more seriously, Master?”

“My bad. Little worn out after getting the crap kicked outta me by the Empire’s knight, in case you forgot.”

“Such blunders wouldn’t happen if you were more vigilant.”

“Please. He’s basically using cheat powers. How else can he be stronger than that crusty old Black Knight? I was sure he’d finish me off a bunch of times back there.”

“These repeated failures of yours stem from your lack of diligence in your daily training,” Luxion reminded me dutifully.

“Yeah, and I’m regretting that now.”

“I lack the necessary battle data for a comprehensive analysis, but I can confirm that Hering’s Demonic Suit outperforms this one. That said, the man piloting this one is more capable than even the Black Knight was.”

“It’s incredible I managed to beat him. Talk about good luck,” I said.

“Someone with ‘good luck’ would not find themselves repeatedly pushed to the verge of death.”

Our meaningless exchange was punctuated by dodges and weaves as I evaded the Demonic Suit chasing after me. I did it with my back facing away from my opponent, accelerating in reverse. An admittedly abnormal way of engaging someone in battle, for sure. It drove my opponent wild with fury.

“Do you mean to mock me, Scumbag Knight?!” His rage boiled over. The number of creepy, lifelike eyes on the surface of his armor multiplied.

“You’re way too easy to antagonize,” I muttered.

“His control of his senses is trickling away. He is starting to show his true colors.”

Luxion’s words added more fuel to the fire. As the Demonic Suit’s anger

swelled, pulsating veins began to protrude on the surface of his Armor.

“I am a holy knight! His Eminence’s sword! A hero...of Rachel...” A whirling torrent manifested at the point of his trident and morphed into a sharp edge. The Demonic Suit unleashed it upon Arroganz.

I swiftly evaded the attacks, disappointed that I had completely missed the mark with my predictions. “What, it’s water this time? Totally out of left field.”

“Why do you insist on playing around mid-battle? Master, my analysis is complete.” There was a short pause after he made that announcement before he followed up with the report. “On a performance level, this Demonic Suit is far inferior to one that possesses a core. Moreover, the commencement of magical attacks is a sign that our opponent is spinning out of control. Neither the Demonic Suit nor the pilot are any threat to us.”

“A pushover, huh?”

“We have also successfully led him far enough away from the capital so the battle will result in no damage to our surroundings.”

“Then I guess it’s time to get serious.” I adjusted my grip on the controls, leaning forward in my seat as I threw Schwert’s thrusters to the max, creating additional distance between myself and the enemy. I pointed my left finger at the Demonic Suit, unleashing the full power of Schwert’s homing lasers. The beams were thicker than ever, and they pierced the enemy’s plating in rapid - succession. They melted straight through to the inside of the suit.

“Gaaaah!” The Demonic Suit’s pained cry ripped through the air. It sent up a barrier, but my lasers had no trouble piercing right through it.

Luxion’s red lens gleamed from within the cockpit as he surveyed the damage. “Resistance is futile. I have completed my analysis. Your time is through.”

“I gotta thank you for obediently following me all the way out here,” I told my enemy.

Even as the lasers fried him alive, he waved his trident, conjuring more water lances to let loose on me. Arroganz avoided them with ease; they were too weak and too slow to pose the slightest threat.

“Wh-what?!” the enemy gasped in disbelief. He must not have realized I led him away on purpose.

“I only ran from you because you going berserk around the school or the capital would have been a serious pain in the ass. Taking you down would’ve been no sweat at all, but...” I paused, letting Luxion finish the explanation.

“We desired further data from you. Unfortunately, what we gathered won’t be of any use after all. You are the weakest Demonic Suit we have faced to date.” Luxion had no compunction about stomping the man’s pride. He sure hated Demonic Suits.

Our derision only fueled the pilot’s indignation, further destabilizing his mental state. Although he had maintained a humanlike shape up until this point, he began to bloat from the inside and balloon into a more monstrous appearance.

“Don’t you *dare* make light of meeeeeee!”

The swollen shape of the Demonic Suit soon came to resemble a blubbery lump of meat. An enormous, bloodshot eye winked into existence on its surface and glared straight at Arroganz. Black liquid oozed from it, almost like tears.

“Let’s finish this. I’m gonna take you down with all I’ve got.”

“This did indeed take longer than I had anticipated.”

I charged the Demonic Suit and skewered it through with my sword. As soon as I was in close quarters, a number of tentacles shot out from it in an attempt to entangle Arroganz. Each one was shorn away by Schwert’s lasers. I brought my thumb down on the buttons at the tips of the control sticks.

“Impact,” said Luxion.

Each of Arroganz’s hands turned red, transferring their power through the sword in their grasp until it, too, changed color. A searing heat radiated out from it that elicited an agonized scream from the Demonic Suit.

“It buuuuuurns!”

The cries were like that of a whimpering child. Luxion terminated off all sound input after that shriek, leaving the cockpit utterly silent. I could see what was

happening through the monitors, even without being able to hear it.

The fleshy clump shot into the air. It exploded, raining blood and chunks of flesh down all around us. Once I was satisfied that the deed was done, I turned to Luxion.

“Why’d you cut off the audio? And did you really need to push him over the edge with that last line?”

Luxion’s red lens stared straight back at me. He answered curtly, “I suspected it would cause you less mental stress if he was not in human form when we defeated him. As for the audio, it was unpleasant and pointless to listen to. I shut it off out of consideration for you.”

“I just...*can’t* with you.” I almost grumbled that he took a few too many liberties, but his typically crappy attitude aside, I sensed he meant what he said about doing it for my benefit. “Anyway, let’s hurry up and get back.”

Chapter 7:

Those Who Slither in the Dark

BACK AT THE SCHOOL, a lone soldier—still disguised as an air pirate—ran for his life, rifle in hand.

“Crap, crap, crap! These Holfortians are a bunch of wild savages!”

This particular man had infiltrated the boys’ dormitory. His comrades had determined it would throw a wrench in their plans if the boys were to run to the aid of the girls in their dormitory, so he had been sent to hinder any potential backup.

The man hid in the shadow of a pillar and paused to catch his breath.

“‘It’ll be fine, they’re just a bunch of brats,’ huh? What a load of crap. These guys are ridiculously strong!”

He stayed hidden while a gang of weapon-wielding boys rushed down a nearby flight of stairs. The one with the bobbed hair carried a lantern in his left hand and a sword in his right.

“I’m sure he ran this way, Daniel.”

Beside him was a much taller boy with an enormous battle axe in his hands.

“Bastards, slithering around like a bunch of snakes. We’ll beat the living daylights out of ’em! We’re gonna sniff him out, Raymond, I swear, if it’s the last thing we do!”

“You got it.”

The two raging beasts, as the soldier viewed them, had blood on their weapons. He guessed they were third-year students. Several more students rushed in behind them, each carrying the weapon in which they were most proficient. The air was thick with unquenched bloodlust. These aristocratic students hated air pirates with a passion. For those from regional territory, pirates were an eyesore that only drained the lord’s profits. They had no idea that the man was really a soldier. His disguise had backfired marvelously and lit

a furious fire in the boys.

As the band of students marched off in a different direction, the soldier hastily scrambled to go in the exact opposite one.

“Dammit! The guys at the top just sped outta here at the first sign of things going awry. They gonna abandon us to our deaths? If I stay here, I’m dead meat. I gotta get out!” He glanced through a window only to find that the ship that had carried them here was fading into the distance. Apparently, they couldn’t afford to wait for their men to retreat and return to the ship. They’d pulled out of the mission entirely.

When he finally made it to the first floor of the dormitory, he spotted a couple—a girl and a boy.

“Eri, this way!”

“Yes, Prince Jake.”

A petite boy was holding the hand of a rather tall woman as they ran for the exit. What was a female student even doing in the boys’ dormitory to begin with? The soldier found it curious, but what really caught his attention was what the girl called the boy.

“So that little squirt is a prince, is he?”

The soldier held his rifle at the ready and jumped out in front of the two, turning the barrel of his gun toward the girl. “Don’t move! If you do, this girl’s gonna—”

The man’s plan wasn’t a bad one—taking Eri hostage to capture Jake so he could use the prince and see himself to safety. Unfortunately for him, Eri leaped out of his line of fire and charged. Panicked, he fired at her only to miss and hit the floor instead. He tried to pump his rifle so he could fire another shot, but in that time Eri had already closed what little distance was left between them. She slammed her elbow into his arm, causing him to drop the rifle. Then her beautiful long leg swung up—he expected she aimed to catch him in the jaw—and then, in the next moment, her heel came smashing down on him. The soldier doubled over.

Th-this girl is like a freakin’ warrior... he thought. His consciousness began to

fade, but he could faintly hear their conversation.

“Are you all right?!”

“Y-yes, I am, Prince Jake.”

“I told you to knock off the prince crap. Jeez, you sure are strong. Figured you’d had some training, but after seein’ those moves...you must have actual battle experience too, yeah?”

Eri’s movements were swift and practiced, indicating she was accustomed to fighting. It appeared that way to Jake, at any rate.

Eri fidgeted in place, embarrassed. “It’s shameful to admit it, but yes. There was a time when I was a little too hot-blooded for my own good.”

“Nah, you’re plenty cute the way you are.”

“Oh, Prince Jake...” Her cheeks flushed bright red.

“I told you, quit it with that prince stuff. Let’s get outta here, anyway. I’m going back to the palace, so you come with me.” Jake was flustered as well, but he grabbed Eri’s hand even so, ready to lead her away from the scene.

“All right!”

The two were about to resume their dash for the exit when a red-headed boy appeared. “Your Highness! Have you seen Miss Finley anywhere?!”

A group of students was strolling down a palace corridor. I found myself among them, stuck talking with that jerk, Hering.

“You thought I was the culprit?” I sneered at him. “Are you nuts?”

“You were standing at the scene of the crime with a gun in your hand!” Hering retorted.

“Duh, ’cause I used my gun to shoot the real culprit!”

“Then why did *you* suspect *me*?”

“Because I thought you were suspicious from the first.”

“So you admit it! You doubted me too!”

With Luxion and Brave silently glowering at one another in the background, Hering and I begrudgingly explained our own circumstances. Personally, I thought he was crazy to think I could be the assassin.



“Why would you think I’d pull something like this? I’m just a normal civilian—a *pacifist*,” I said.

Behind me, the idiot brigade traded skeptical looks. Brad reacted first, shrugging and snorting with laughter. “If Leon qualifies as a pacifist, I suppose the concept of war simply doesn’t exist in this world.”

“You said it,” Greg agreed with an enthusiastic nod. “I like fighting as much as the next guy, but I’ve got nothin’ on Leon. And he’s definitely no ‘normal civilian,’ neither.”

Ah, how heartbreaking! That even my moronic subordinates have misunderstood me to such a startling degree. Unthinkable, really—I’m a kind, caring, peace-loving guy.

Even Hering eyed me with naked disbelief. “I had every cause to be wary around you. Anyone would be, knowing you’re the one responsible for how the Alzer Republic crumbled from the inside. Anyway. Most damningly, these serial killings started after you returned to the capital.”

“Luxion said he sensed the presence of a Demonic Suit at the scene,” I reminded him. “You should have managed the same. They’re *your* comrades, after all.”

Brave turned his eye toward me and manifested a tiny hand, which he used to jab a finger in my direction. “Who’d notice a presence that small, huh?!”

“I suspected you were wholly incompetent. That you failed to sense something so obvious as another Demon Suit only proves my initial assumption correct,” said Luxion triumphantly.

“Ooh, them’s fighting words, you stupid tin can!”

Our voices echoed through the halls as we walked until at last we arrived at the room designated for us by a palace official. The door before us was conspicuously large, and it was guarded by knights and soldiers alike. As if the ostentatious security detail wasn’t enough, a group of high officials loitered outside for some mysterious reason. When one of the knights noticed us, he hurried over.

“Marquess, His Majesty is waiting for you inside. He has granted permission for Prince Julius, Princess Erica, and Lady Angelica to enter as well.”

Angelica narrowed her eyes. She wasn’t best pleased with the location we’d been taken to. “This is His Majesty’s bedchambers. If we are to discuss strategy, it should be done in a different—” She abruptly cut herself off, seeming to realize the implications of the situation. Her eyes went wide. “Did something happen?”

The knight ushered us into Roland’s room. “Please ask Her Majesty for a more detailed explanation.”

I paused for a moment to glance over my shoulder at Livia and Noelle. They both nodded at me, indicating they had no qualms about not being allowed in with me.

“Please, go on ahead,” said Livia.

“The quicker the better, probably,” Noelle advised.

The rest of the morons, save for Julius, hovered behind them with solemn looks on their faces. As if to answer expressly what already preyed on everyone’s mind, Chris said, “Looks like the situation’s way worse than we suspected.”

When we entered Roland’s spacious quarters, we found a canopy bed presented in the middle. The king rested atop the mattress, his face deathly pale. Even his lips had turned blue. His normally revolting face had little life left in it.

Queen Mylene was beside him, holding his hand. “Your Majesty, the marquess has arrived,” she said.

Roland’s eyes fluttered open. His voice was weak and raspy as he called, “Marquess Bartfort, come closer.”

I did as he asked.

A man in a white coat, who I assumed to be a palace physician, explained, “His Majesty was poisoned a few days ago, and he’s been in this state ever since

—unable to issue orders, as I am sure you can imagine.”

“Poison?”

“Y-yes.” The man averted his gaze and turned back to the king. “Your Majesty, here is your medicine.”

“Sorry to trouble you, Fred.”

Fred slowly helped Roland drink what I could only assume was a medicinal solution. Once he drained the cup, Roland offered me a weak smile. He looked a little less anguished than he had a moment ago.

“It’s just as you wished, I’m in terrible shape. Well? Are you happy to see me like this?”

It was true that I had wished for Roland to suffer, rat bastard that he was, but seeing him like this brought me no joy.

“Knock that crap off.” I hesitated. “Uh. I mean, please do not joke like that, Your Majesty.”

“Such a laudable attitude. Seeing you like this makes the poisoning worth it.” Roland’s voice would break up periodically as he coughed. When finally he managed to settle his breathing again, he said, “I leave you in full command for the time being. Ask Mylene for the complete details of the situation and act accordingly.”

“You want me to fix things?”

“That’s right.”

I glanced at Miss Mylene, who was dabbing away her tears with a handkerchief. She nodded at me to show she agreed with Roland’s decision. I understood his reasoning to some degree. Since I had Luxion at my disposal, I could make short work of the problems plaguing the kingdom. Still, it made more sense for the king to entrust his son, Julius, with that power.

“Prince Julius is here. I could follow him and act on his orders,” I suggested.

Roland didn’t bother to speak a word to his son, even though Julius was right next to me at Roland’s bedside. It seemed cold to me.

“I can’t,” said Roland. “Julius has no achievements to show for himself, and he has a terrible reputation in the palace. Were he to be the one giving orders, there would be those who would refuse to listen.”

“So that’s why you’re handing command over to me?”

After a short pause, he said, “Brat, I hate you.”

At first I wanted to roll my eyes. This jerk was on death’s door and these were his parting words to me? But Roland grabbed my hand and squeezed it tight, staring straight at me with his bloodshot eyes, entirely serious.

“But I recognize how powerful you are.”

“You overestimate me.”

I would usually pump up the bravado to antagonize him, but even I had the sense to show more prudence here.

“I know you’ll take care of things. I leave it to you, Mar...que...”

“Your Majesty!” Miss Mylene cried as he lost consciousness.

The palace physician knocked me out of the way and examined him. After a moment, he breathed a deep sigh. “It’s all right. He exhausted himself and fell asleep.”

His stamina had given out.

While everyone else in the room slumped with relief, Miss Mylene stepped away from the king’s bedside and glanced at me. “Marquess, there’s no time to waste. We must act immediately, lest the capital be swallowed in a sea of flames.”

“What’s going on?”

The two of us started toward the exit, knowing we would only disrupt Roland’s rest by discussing the matter here. We walked side by side as Miss Mylene filled me in on the details.

“Riots have broken out across the capital. We don’t know who the mastermind is, but what we do know is that the former aristocrats who were lurking inside the capital have made their move as a group.”

“The guys who had their noble status revoked?”

“The very same. We would have had no problem dealing with one or two organizations rising up like this, but we cannot handle this many at once.”

Angie and Julius followed close behind us. Curiosity piqued by what she’d heard thus far, Angie asked, “Why did you leave them to their own devices for this long?”

“We arrested any individuals whom we deemed dangerous. This time, a number of small-time organizations acted simultaneously. I speculate that Rachel is behind it all.”

Given that the trident-wielding Demonic Suit I fought earlier proclaimed himself to be a holy knight from Rachel, I suspected they were the orchestrators of this whole affair too. Miss Mylene had beaten me to the conclusion. *Impressive.*

“House Roseblade looked into things for me,” Miss Mylene explained. “They were a big help.”

“The Roseblades? You mean Miss Deirdre’s house?”

As if on cue, the woman in question appeared as soon as we stepped out of the room. Deirdre Fou Roseblade was clad in her usual gaudy gown with a folding fan in hand. Her long, tightly coiled curls were pulled back out of her face, giving her as confident and cocky an appearance as ever.

“You make us sound like complete strangers when you call it *my* house,” she said. “The Bartforts and the Roseblades are practically family! My elder sister is marrying into your house, if you’ll recall.”

Angie looked visibly displeased at Miss Deirdre’s appearance. “Need I remind you that you stand before Her Majesty?”

Miss Mylene shook her head. “I don’t mind at all. Deirdre, what happened with the airship that took off?” She referred to the one that had assaulted the academy.

Miss Deirdre covered her mouth with her fan. “My brother-in-law, Nicks, is already handling it.”

“He is?” I asked in surprise.

Peering through a window on the ship, Gabino spotted a warship in hot pursuit flying flags with the House Bartfort emblem. The ship’s speed far outmatched their own, and so the distance between both vessels was gradually shrinking.

“It *would* be House Bartfort,” Gabino remarked with a look of disgust.

“They’re the ones that took down one of our fleets posing as air pirates, right?” asked a terrified subordinate at Gabino’s side.

The incident in question occurred during the academy’s spring break. The Kingdom of Rachel’s objective was to annihilate Leon’s house as a means to exact their revenge. After receiving intel about his promotion, they assumed he would remain in the capital for the time being and aimed to carry out their plans on his homestead while he wasn’t around to protect it. What they hadn’t expected was that Leon had, in fact, returned to his family home. The plan hadn’t worked out. They lost all ten of their disguised battleships.

Part of why Rachel cooperated with underground organizations like the Ladies of the Forest was to avoid direct confrontation with Leon, and by extension, House Bartfort. What a shortsighted, low-return strategy that had turned out to be.

Ordinarily, Gabino would never have approved of such a petty plan. However, by the order of His Eminence, the Holy Kingdom of Rachel’s king, he’d been left with no other choice. One had no right to refuse a king’s order. And yet, for all of their efforts, for all the sacrifices they had paid, their revenge on Leon had amounted to little more than idle pestering. Their objective itself was so vague that Gabino had long considered the likelihood of failure, but even with all of his foresight, he never anticipated they would be cornered this badly.

We already deployed the Demonic Knight and used up all the Demonic Suit fragments we had on hand. Our reserves of soldiers and ammunition are tapped out. It will be difficult to put up much more of a fight here on out.

With plans for escape in mind, Gabino issued his orders. “All right, men. We

are going to charge the enemy! Steel yourselves for what is to come!”

The faces of the few remaining soldiers set into determined frowns. After Gabino addressed them, he turned to his direct subordinate. In a hushed voice, careful so no one else could overhear, he said, “You go out and prepare a small vessel for us.”

“Are you certain about this?”

“Yes.”

Gabino sent the man from the bridge, maintaining the look of a confident commander for his final few soldiers. They naturally assumed that he, too, had hardened his resolve.

Nicks was standing on the bridge of the Bartfort family’s battleship, acting as commanding officer.

“Are we far enough away from the capital?” he asked. “Good, then start pelting them with our guns!”

The captain of the ship nodded and turned to his crewmen. “You heard him. Open fire!”

The airship’s turrets began to turn, taking aim at the enemy and then firing. The enemy’s airship only had cannons on the sides, but Nicks’s vessel was created by Luxion, who had furnished it with fully rotating turrets. This allowed them to attack without having to turn their ship to the side. Their enemy didn’t stand a chance.

The rounds from the turrets streaked red across the night sky and struck home. Fire erupted from within the pirate’s ship, creating towers of smoke as it began to lose altitude.

“Cease fire!” bellowed the captain.

Nicks breathed a sigh of relief.

Seeing his reaction, the captain assured him, “Young Master, you performed admirably as our commander.”

Nicks frowned at the way the man addressed him. “C’mon. You don’t have to treat me like a child.”

The battle ended sooner than anyone could have imagined. Unable to find any opportunity to escape, Gabino was captured along with the rest of his men, who were still in their air pirate disguises. Nicks had them bound and brought to the deck of his ship.

Gabino gazed out, watching the flames swallow their fallen ship. He then turned to glare at the girl who had stolen his favorite pocket watch. She was a beautiful thief, to be sure, with long silky blonde hair and blue eyes.

“This was made in the Empire. An awfully extravagant item for you to be carrying,” she commented with a smile, staring down her nose at him.

“You have some eye for quality,” Gabino shot back with a sneer.

“I was taught to identify the value of treasure.”

“You’re a bunch of savages who happen to have adventurer blood running through your veins. That’s all.” Gabino’s condescending attitude toward adventurers filled every word he spoke, a testament to how socially inferior such an occupation was within the Holy Kingdom of Rachel.

The woman, Dorothea, seemed unbothered. She returned his condescension in kind. “What an ironic statement for an air pirate to make.”

Gabino let out a small breath. “There is no use in hiding behind disguises having come this far. I request to be treated as a prisoner of war. I am from The Holy Kingdom of—”

Before he could finish exposing his own identity, Dorothea snatched up a rifle stashed nearby and fired a shot into the air. Having demonstrated that it was loaded with live ammunition, she aimed the gun at him.

“We have no use for your lies! You are an air pirate, and I am an aristocrat of Holfort Kingdom. Thus, I must dispose of you and your ilk.”

Gabino panicked. She clearly had no intention to treat them as prisoners of war. “B-but we’re from the Holy Kingdom of—”

“There are no soldiers from the Holy Kingdom of Rachel here. You attacked our academy as air pirates, so air pirates you shall be. How else could we possibly interpret this situation?” She smiled at them, but her expression gradually turned cold. “You assaulted House Roseblade before, correct?”

Gabino screwed up his face. This woman was one of the Roseblades. “I’m afraid I have no idea to what you are referring. We had no hand in any such thing.”

“Your survivors spilled everything. Roseblades show no mercy to their enemies. Our ethos remains the same, whether as an aristocrat or an adventurer: The second you allow people to treat you with contempt, you sacrifice all your worth.” Dorothea looked at him the same way one might look at an ant.

Gabino sensed that death was all but inevitable unless he convinced this woman to spare him. He pleaded, “I have beneficial information to offer! I will give you everything I know about the traitorous former aristocrats lurking in your kingdom’s capital. Please—”

Dorothea frowned, disappointed. “That information would be valuable to the capital, yes, but what benefit does it provide to me and my husband?”

“Huh? Plenty, surely! The royal family would be in your debt if you were to hand them this intel!”

“Your ‘intel’ has no value whatsoever.” Dorothea’s face lost all emotion save for contemptuous boredom. She turned to a group of Roseblade soldiers and commanded, “Take him away. We will need to teach him exactly what happens to those who pick a fight with House Roseblade.”

As if on cue, another battleship approached. This one sported the Roseblade flag. Gabino and his men blanched, already picturing the worst possible future that could be in store for them.

I summoned Hering to a private room in the castle. I suspected the other members of my group were gathered in a strategy room, a map spread out before them, discussing how to go about handling this matter. Given that I had

been entrusted with command, I should be offering my own thoughts there, but I had to speak with Hering before I did anything else.

“Are you the ones jamming Luxion?” I asked.

I had speculated they were responsible for the city-wide interference, but my suspicions weren’t confirmed until Hering shot a look at Brave.

Hering sighed abruptly. “Kurosuke, stop interfering with them. You said yourself that it wears you out to do it.”

Brave’s ability to hamper Luxion to such a degree made him a serious threat. But just as we were wary of him, he was not inclined to give us an inch either.

“No. The second I stop jamming him, the two of them will launch a sneak attack on us. Partner, you can only give them the benefit of the doubt because you don’t know what they’re really like,” said Brave.

“Those should be my words,” Luxion argued back, his voice lower and more menacing than usual. Perhaps that indicated how furious he was. He was awfully emotional for an AI. “Have you any idea how many human lives have been lost because of your mere existence?”

“Really?! Gonna play that game, are ya, you tin can?! Then let me tell you a thing or two!”

The two launched into their own little argument while Hering and I shrugged. Hering seemed willing to stop the jamming, so there was only one thing left to do.

“All right. Allow me to give Luxion an order here and now. Luxion, you are not to attack the Empire’s exchange students. That includes Brave as well.”

“Master, have you lost your senses entirely?! What about the promise you made to me earlier?”

Luxion meant how I agreed to do whatever he wanted with Hering and Brave once we’d defeated the trident-wielding Demonic Suit. Sadly for him, I was a bad person with a selective memory. I tended to forget things when it suited me.

“Sorry. Don’t remember that.”

“You *do* remember, don’t you? Truly, you have an irredeemable habit of prioritizing yourself over anything or anyone else.”

Having seen my pledge, Hering said to Brave, “Kurosuke, get some rest. Even Mia was worried about you.”

“When it comes to protecting you and Mia, Partner, I refuse to take half measures!”

“You can protect us without jamming them, can’t you? And if the capital did find itself swallowed in a sea of flames... Well, then both Mia and I will find ourselves in a rough spot.”

“Urgh... Okay! Just this once!”

Their relationship was decidedly different from the one I shared with Luxion, but they had their own unique dynamic.

Brave’s body trembled in place. A moment later, Luxion’s red lens lit up.

“My link has been reestablished.”

“Mm’kay! Let’s get this over with then, since this is Roland’s last request.”

“Last?” Luxion echoed, as if he didn’t understand what I was saying.

Roland didn’t look like he was long for this world. He was a rat bastard, to be sure, but I at least wanted to grant him this final wish. Although I honestly hated his guts, I didn’t want him to die, and either way, these riots would disturb the rest of the citizenry. *Best to clean this up quickly.*

“Enough dawdling, let’s get a move on. Miss Mylene is waiting for us.”

“Need I remind you that Angelica is waiting for you too? Such remarks are extremely insensitive. I will report to her immediately about this latest infraction.”

“I’d really rather you didn’t.”

Hering and Brave watched our exchange before glancing at one another.

“They, uh, sure seem close,” said Hering.

“I feel ashamed of myself thinking this pair almost killed us back there,” Kurosuke grumbled.

Excuse you, we almost lost our lives in that fight too!

As soon as Luxion's link was reestablished, a vast number of drones stationed throughout the capital drifted high into the air and provided him with a bird's-eye view. They transmitted all data to Luxion in a microsecond. Once these mass-produced robots received their orders, they began attending to their assigned tasks. Some remained airborne while others headed for specific locations. The entire city was under Luxion's dominion.

When I arrived at the strategy room, the kingdom's main players were there to greet me. This included Miss Mylene and Julius from the royal family, as well as Miss Clarice's father, Minister Bernard.

As soon as Angie spotted me, she hurried over and snatched my arm. "Where have you been? We can't decide anything without you here."

She had good reason to be irritable. We were facing an emergency situation where every second counted, and yet as the man in charge, I'd strolled in leisurely with no urgency whatsoever. Everyone's eyes gathered on me in a gallery of frowns.

"Sorry 'bout that, but, uh... It's all gonna work out now."

I strode toward the table where the map was located. Luxion emitted a beam of light from his eye onto the surface of the map, highlighting a number of areas.

"I have indicated where we believe the enemies' hideouts are located. I have also completed an analysis predicting the enemies' future movements. I will now present my proposal for where to relocate our troops."

The strategy room erupted into a cacophony at this abrupt flood of information, but what really caught my eye was the adorably flustered Miss Mylene. The lights Luxion had created on the map had already begun moving about.

"How recent is this information on their movements?" she asked.

“This is all in real time,” Luxion informed her curtly.

Miss Mylene’s eyes widened for a split second. She dropped her gaze, sadness overtaking her features for but a brief moment, before she shook her head and turned to me. Apparently she had locked away whatever emotions had consumed her, but I wondered what exactly caused her reaction.

“Marquess Bartfort,” she said, “we will commence with the relocation of our troops then. I trust there is no issue with that?”

“Huh? Uh, no, go ahead.”

I was confused at first why she was even asking, at least until I remembered that I was supposed to be the one in command. She couldn’t make such calls on her own without running them by me first.

Minister Bernard clutched his head in his hands. “Our enemies are many and so dispersed. This will take a considerable amount of time.”

His comment implied they had the ability to take care of all these insurgents, but they couldn’t conceivably handle such a great number at once. With that in mind, I paused to consider where I might borrow the necessary military strength to bolster our forces. My mind immediately went to my friends.

“Allow me to call for my friends at the academy. Several of them may have their airships already nearby.”

Some families, like my own, periodically visited the capital. With the right timing, we might secure a number of ships that way.

Minister Bernard nodded eagerly. “That would be a great help. But then, who should we leave in command of them?”

Good question. Those friends are the only people I have at hand to—wait... I realized that Julius was staring at me. *That’s right! The idiot brigade!* I could use the same formation as in the game.

“We’ll summon Brad and have him command from the safety of Einhorn. We can put Greg and Chris to work too. We’ll invade the enemies’ hideouts.”

“Leon, aren’t you leaving someone out?” Julius asked hopefully. “You know, a man you can trust more than any other?”

“Oh, right. I guess I did forget.”

He smiled. “You’re our commander-in-chief, my lord. Try to keep it together.”

I nodded. “Right, I’d like to get Jake out there on an airbike if we can, but the problem is, I don’t know any skilled airbike riders that I could send out with him. Guess he’ll have to stay put this time around.”

Julius stared at me. “Leon, what about me?”

“Sit still and be good. You’re out of your mind if you think I can send a prince out there.”

His shoulders slumped in defeat. Miss Mylene glanced at her son, conflicted.

I had given up on Jilk’s participation in this mission, but Minister Bernard said, “Marquess, how many airbikes would you like prepared for this endeavor?”

“As many as we can. If we put Jilk in charge, I’m sure he can make good use of them. In a place as cramped as the capital, airbikes’ll have better maneuverability than Armors.”

“I would be happy to offer House Atlee’s full cooperation to that end.”

“You sure?” I asked. “Jilk’ll be commanding you directly.”

Jilk and House Atlee had a bitter past, and one that was entirely Jilk’s fault; he had broken off his engagement to Miss Clarice Atlee. This was an unforgivable offense as far as her family was concerned.

“It shan’t be an issue,” Minister Bernard assured me. “And lest you have forgotten, we own an airbike racing track. I know a considerable number of people who can assist.”

That was great and all, but could we seriously entrust those people to Jilk’s care? That was what concerned me. *Then again, it’s Jilk who’s gotta worry about how to deal with them, not me. He deserves to suffer for the crap he pulled anyway.*

“All right. Please lend us your aid then,” I said.

“It would be my pleasure.”

Next, I turned my gaze to the person whom I had the most faith in—Angie.

Her family, the Redgraves, commanded the largest force in the capital. It would be an enormous help having them give their assistance.

“I’d like to ask House Redgrave to pitch in too. Do you mind, Angie?”

She averted her gaze, much to my surprise. Her hands balled into fists. Vexed, she shook her head. “I’m afraid that my father and older brother can’t help this time. They’re away from the capital.”

“What?”

“And I cannot take command of the dukedom’s forces on my own. I really am sorry, Leon.”

That was strange. One of them was always in the capital, either Mr. Vince or his son, Mr. Gilbert. That wasn’t to say there was never a time when both returned to their territory, but it was decidedly irregular. I opened my mouth to press Angie for details, but Minister Bernard clapped a hand on my shoulder. When I glanced back at him, he shook his head. Miss Mylene dropped her gaze.

I’m guessing I should let the subject drop?

“If that’s a dead end, then we’ve gotta make do with what we have. I’ll go out in Arroganz and—”

“You mustn’t!” Miss Mylene interrupted. “Leon—no, Marquess Bartfort, please do stay here. You will, won’t you?”

“Huh? Uh, okay.” She said it with such authority that I couldn’t defy her. I nodded instead.

Julius had retreated a fair distance from the rest of the group in the meantime. He was pouting. “I wanted to go out with everyone else and fight...”

Hey, you know what I want? For you to get it through your thick skull that you’re a freakin’ prince!

Brad took a seat on Einhorn’s bridge where Leon usually sat, decked out in a purple uniform. “That Leon knows how to work people to the bone! I do commend his sense in entrusting me with his ship, however. A most prudent decision indeed! I am hardly opposed to the grittiness of the battlefield, but a

position such as this that demands an intelligent mind is a far better fit.”

While he reveled in his little moment of triumph, Daniel and Raymond stood nearby, having been forced to board with him. Though weary of their chosen commander’s antics, they preoccupied themselves with gazing outside. Three other battleships accompanied Einhorn, all belonging to their fellow friends.

Prefacing his words with an exaggerated sigh, Daniel said, “All right then, Captain...”

“General,” Brad insisted. “I am overseeing four battleships as we speak. That is the most appropriate title.”

Raymond rolled his eyes. “Fine, *General*. What’s the plan?”

Brad’s mission was to use the battleships to carry troops and supplies to their intended destination and drop them. At the appropriate time, he was to recover them and relocate them elsewhere. Einhorn’s main cannon could not be used within the capital, so its presence in the skies above the city served solely as an intimidation tactic against the insurgents.

“We already know where the enemies’ hideouts are. All that remains is for us to visit each one and seize those involved,” said Brad. “What’s annoying is their sheer number.”

“The guys at the top knew this already. They should’ve taken these groups out before this started,” Daniel grumbled, displeased at being dragged into this affair with no forewarning.

Raymond shared his view. He, too, struggled to understand what the higher-ups in the capital were thinking. “Yeah, good point. Considering how much of a mess we’re in now, I can see a bunch of people getting dismissed from their positions soon.”

Brad listened as they discussed the matter in the background, but most of his attention was concentrated on the map indicating the location of the enemies’ hideouts. He drifted into quiet contemplation for a moment. *The entire capital is currently under Leon’s jurisdiction. Her Majesty must feel uneasy...especially now that the Redgraves have forsaken them.*

Sadly, the Redgraves were one of many noble houses that had found a reason

not to assist with quelling the riots. Some had estates in the capital, knew of the situation, and chose to ignore it anyway. Most were regional nobles. Their attitudes suggested that they didn't care whether the capital burned.

Whatever we think about it, things around Leon are gonna get rough. Brad sighed quietly before getting his game face on and thrusting his right hand out in front of him.

"All right, I have decided. We'll move clockwise and assault each location! That has more beauty to it."

Daniel and Raymond shrugged in unison. Neither could comprehend why Brad would want beauty on a battlefield.

Greg kicked down the door of one of the capital's pubs, which had emptied of customers due to the riots. He wore infantry gear this time and carried a rifle. Behind him were similarly equipped troops who cast their gaze about the pub as soon as they entered.

"This way!" Greg shouted. He made his way to the stairs as soon as he located them and ascended to the second floor of the pub. It served as an inn.

His soldiers called out from behind him, "It's dangerous!"

"It'll be fine."

He continued his advance to the second-floor hallway. When he came to a bedroom door, he pressed his back to the wall outside of it. Gunshots echoed as whoever was on the other side unloaded on the door, leaving it riddled with holes. Greg identified the gun perfectly by the sound of its fire.

That's a handgun. I'm guessin' it's just one guy.

As soon as his enemy was finished firing and had to unload, Greg used the opportunity to kick the door down and charge inside. The room housed a family of former aristocrats; a man with a mustache, his wife, and the rest of their household.

"Freeze!"

When Greg's troops spilled through the doorway, the family abandoned their

weapons and lifted their hands up in surrender.

Tears of frustration welled up in the mustached man's eyes. "Damn. Damn it all! Why is this happening? If only I hadn't run back then..."

"Too late to bemoan your fate now," Greg spat, unwilling and unable to waste time listening to his excuses. "Shoulda taken the initiative for better things sooner if you didn't want things to end up like this."

This man and his family had been stripped of their noble status during the war between Holfort Kingdom and the former Principality of Fanoss, when they fled from the enemy rather than face them. After that, they had taken to running this pub and the upstairs inn, all the while inviting in mercenaries and criminals to the capital to employ in their uprising.

Greg left the task of tying each of them up to his men.

"Jeez, they're all the same," he grumbled to himself as he marched outside the pub, still holding his rifle in hand. There, he found Chris piloting his Armor. "All done, Chris?"

"Yes, I am finished here," Chris said. He sounded deeply irritated. "Brad ordered us to head to the next place immediately. That guy certainly enjoys cracking the whip."

Chris's mission had been to capture the mercenaries and criminals that the family kept sheltered inside the inn. Said family had furnished them with weapons and even Armors to use. Since Chris was in charge of a squadron full of men in Armors, he was tasked with their subjugation.

"You've got it rough out here," said Greg.

"I could say the same of you. As soon as you are done here, you will head off to handle another location, correct?"

"Yep. Once we hand off the criminals, we gotta go to the next hideout."

Their conversation was brief. A number of Armors assembled above Chris, hovering in the air.

"Lord Arclight, I am pleased to report that we have finished handing over the mercenaries."

Chris guided his own suit into the air, giving Greg a light wave as he left. “All right. Let’s continue to our next destination.”

Greg watched them leave. He rested his rifle on his shoulder and muttered, “Guess I oughta do the same.”

A group of women raced down a narrow alleyway in a particularly cramped area of the capital, where a high concentration of buildings were crammed snugly into a small space. The Ladies of the Forest’s top brass and representative headed the line as they fled. The rest of their organization’s members and their families followed close behind, lugging unwieldy bags and other luggage stuffed to bursting with high-value, cumbersome items—primarily belongings of the representative and the rest of the high management. The high-ranking members had left the task of hauling their valuables to their subordinates, with strict orders that not a single item be abandoned.

The chief representative herself ran with all her might. She couldn’t afford to mind that the hem of her gown grew filthier with every step. “We must escape quickly! Really, the nerve of that man and his countrymen—swearing we could entrust the matter to them. This proves that even men from Rachel cannot be relied upon!” She was livid with Gabino for breaking his promise and fleeing the scene.

Other groups in the capital who similarly detested the current social order had come to her and the rest of the Ladies of the Forest to petition for aid. That alerted them to the imminent danger.

“That the government would go out of their way to attack our hideouts one-by-one like this! It’s unthinkable. Who could have ratted us out? Who is the traitor?!”

As soon as the representative sensed danger, she gathered her things and fled. She was determined not to be taken in by the authorities like the rest. The other members of upper management trailed close behind her.

“Are you certain that was wise, to abandon the others?” one asked meekly. “Those we entrusted with missions—such as Zola and her children—have no

idea we have abandoned our hideout.”

When the representative and the upper management made the call to flee, Zola and her children were away from the hideout on the representative’s orders. They would be a step behind in fleeing as a result.

“Who cares about them! Her family *caused* this entire catastrophe. She and her spawn deserve to be caught.”

The Ladies of the Forest navigated the winding back alleyways in their attempt to flee, only to be blinded when they popped out onto a main street.

“Wh-why is...?”

The representative collapsed on her knees, exhausted from the prolonged running. It took her a moment to realize she and the others were surrounded by soldiers on airbikes. She glanced over her shoulder, thinking to double back, and found the way was already blocked off by more troops. Guns were pointed at the group, leaving them nowhere to run. The representative’s shoulders sagged in defeat.

A soldier hopped off his bike and removed his helmet. Beneath it, the representative was surprised to recognize the smiling face of a former noble heir.

“Lord...Jilk?”

His eyes widened. “Oh, my reputation precedes me. Unfortunately, I don’t recognize you at all.”

Much as she knew she was grasping at straws, she pleaded, “I glimpsed you from afar in the past and have been a huge fan of yours ever since. I beg you, can’t you let us go?”

His smile grew strained. “Unfortunately, I cannot. It pains me to lose a fan, truly, but I would be deemed a criminal if I let riot instigators run free. And if you are, indeed, my fan, then you wouldn’t want to see that happen to me, now would you? So I have no choice but to apprehend you and your comrades.” He glanced at his men. “Arrest them all.”

The other men dismounted from their bikes at Jilk's command, though not without scathing, bitter remarks for their "leader."

"'Arrest them all,' he says? Give me a break. Acting like he's the boss of us."

"Stupid creep."

"Dirtbag, abandoning Lady Clarice like that."

They followed orders even as they vocalized their great dissatisfaction about doing so.

One of the men among their number had been a devoted follower of Clarice who placed second in the school's airbike race behind Leon. A seasoned racer, he'd taken up airbike racing professionally after graduation. He did as he was asked as reluctantly as his teammates.

Jilk shot him a dubious smile. "Thank you, Mr. Dan, for your assistance."

Dan seethed with barely concealed anger toward Jilk. "I am doing this because Lord Bernard and Marquess Bartfort requested it of me. I would never take orders from you otherwise."

The other men nodded emphatically as they set to the task of binding the Ladies of the Forest. These men, assembled by Mr. Bernard, held a deep-seated grudge toward Jilk for annulling his engagement to Clarice. If not for the emergency situation, and orders from two men whom they did respect, they would never give Jilk's commands the least bit of attention. They were half tempted to use their weapons on Jilk instead—to kill him and be done with it—but somehow found the strength to refrain.

Their hostility was not lost on Jilk. He continued beaming as if it didn't bother him in the least. "Basically, you hate my guts and you're following my orders because you were told to do so. What a relief it is, to have that on the table! I see that I may work you all to the bone without worrying as to whether you'll follow instructions."

His words added yet more fuel to the fire. If Dan wasted any time thinking about Jilk, he'd be consumed with rage, so he focused on the mission.

"Seems your prediction was correct," he said. "There's no room for doubt."

You have a talent for meticulously chasing down those who try to run. Your personality, though... That is another matter entirely.” Dan hated Jilk, but he had to recognize how ridiculously skilled the man was.

The others seemed to share Dan’s appraisal. Jilk’s competence as a leader, coupled with Bernard and Leon’s request, drove them all to follow his command despite their reservations.

“Something about how you phrased that doesn’t quite sit right, but I will let it go this time,” said Jilk. “I admit that this kind of work suits my strengths. It’s easy enough to anticipate what people like this are thinking and surmise where they will try to run. Even I must confess my analytical ability is almost terrifying.”

Dan sneered at how blatantly Jilk sang his own praises. “Don’t you figure that you can read them so easily because you’re the same kinda scum that they are?”

The other men nodded furiously in agreement.

Chapter 8:

The Bartfort Sisters

RIOTS HAD BROKEN out all over the capital. Residents frantically fled the danger zones, and Finley found herself caught up in the chaos. She carried a shopping bag in her left hand that contained some new clothes and accessories she had bought earlier. Jenna gripped her right hand and dragged her along after her.

“Step on it, Finley!”

“Jen, wait up!”

Yes. Finley could not be found anywhere on school grounds for one simple reason: She had gone out to the capital with Jenna to play around.

When Finley heard the sound of gunfire on a distant street, she reflexively ducked her head. “What’s happening? Hey, Jen!”

“The hell if I know!” Jenna snapped back at her, too panicked by their present emergency to use kinder words. “But I can tell you this, we’re not sticking around to find out.”

Ordinarily, Finley would be back at the student dormitory by now, but she had stayed out and broke curfew due to Jenna’s invitation. They were enjoying their day out together when all the madness began. Both girls were blindsided by the sudden violence, but as soon as they realized fighting had broken out across the city, they hurriedly tried to escape.

“It seems like something is going on over at the academy too,” Finley said. “I saw an airship over there—there were Armors fighting above the capital.”

While the sisters were eager to take shelter, they had no idea where they could feasibly do so. Jenna didn’t stop to ponder it, nor did she chance a glance back at Finley. She faced ahead as she shouted, “Enough gabbing! Move your legs! Help will come eventually. Nicks and Leon are here.”

In spite of her constant mockery for her older and younger brother, her words

hinted that she was relying on them. Finley, by comparison, had lived at home her entire life before coming to the academy for the first time. She was skeptical that her brothers could be counted on in a situation like this.

“You think we can leave it to them?” she asked. “Are you sure?”

Jenna yanked Finley into an alleyway and pressed her body flat against the wall, struggling to calm her breathing. All the running had worn her out. “You really are an idiot,” she managed through gasping breaths.

Finley huffed and puffed as she mopped up the sweat on her own face. “Who are you calling an idiot? It’s *your* fault we’re in this mess! I tried to go back earlier, but nooo! ‘There’s no harm in breaking curfew,’ you said, and you kept dragging me places!” Had Jenna not goaded her to stay out later, she was confident she would be safe at the academy.

Jenna knew deep down that she was the one at fault, but Finley’s eagerness to put all the blame at her feet soured her temper. “You were totally on board! You said you wanted to go to a chic restaurant, and when we did, you ordered half the menu. Remember?”

The two of them began to bicker in earnest when a man appeared from the depths of the alleyway. He had a gun. The second they spotted him, the sisters gawped—partly from fear but mainly because they recognized him.

The man was clad in the customary work uniform for academy staff. He pointed his gun at the two and said, “Guess I lucked out after all. You guys are gonna come quietly...or else.”

Jenna stepped in front of Finley, glowering. “Rutart... Here in the capital all along, were you?”

“Don’t take that chummy tone with me! If things were as they should be, I’d be a baron...no, a marquess by now!” His manner implied he thought himself capable of all of Leon’s achievements, if only he hadn’t had the opportunity stolen from him.

“You, a marquess? Way too unrealistic, don’t you think?” Finley retorted bluntly from where she hid in her older sister’s shadow.

“Dummy,” Jenna snapped at her, flustered. “Don’t piss him—”

Before she could finish, Rutart pulled the trigger. A dry popping sound echoed around them. A split second later, Jenna sank to the ground.

“Jen?!” Finley cried.

Jenna clutched at her right thigh. In spite of what had to be excruciating pain, she hissed, “Jerk. This is definitely going to leave a scar.”

“Jen, y-you’re hurt!”

“It’s just a scratch,” Jenna insisted, even as blood came gushing from the wound. Fortunately, the bullet wasn’t lodged in her leg, but that was cold comfort. It had pierced clean through—a significant injury by any metric.

Rutart’s poker face held firm as he advanced. “Know your place. You two whelps are nowhere near my level.” He had fallen from grace like his mother, but he retained his obnoxious pride. “The two of you will be my hostages to use against Leon. If you don’t want to die, then keep your mouths shut and do as you’re told.”

The two girls were guided back to the Ladies of the Forest’s hideout. It was largely deserted now that the representative and her flunkies had vacated the place. The two sisters’ hands were bound behind their backs, and a cloth was secured around Jenna’s injured leg. From where they lay on the cold, hard floor, they heard the voices of three people arguing. Three people with whom Finley and Jenna—no, the entire Bartfort family—had bitter ties.

One voice belonged to Zola, who now wore filthy rags instead of gaudy gowns. Her hair and skin were a mess, making her look far older than her actual age. Her hands were hidden by a pair of black gloves.

“Why are *those* the two you brought back with you?” Zola screeched, confused and furious about their situation. “Where is the princess? I came back after fetching the item requested of me only to find the other women had vanished. The representative too! I have no idea what is happening anymore! Explain!”

Another voice came from Merce, who was as ostentatiously dressed as ever. The main difference was her use of garish makeup that stood out even in the

darkness of night. She had grown thinner in the few years since they had last seen her, suggesting she'd been through a lot of hardship.

"You are utterly useless! You had your pick of noble ladies and civilians to use as hostages! There was even a princess from a foreign government present at the academy. Why didn't you bring us anyone of value?"

Rutart cowered as the two women furiously ripped into him. "I-I would have liked to have brought someone of more respectable status too, you know! But His Highness and those other noble bodies suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and I had no choice but to run. I happened to find these two on my way back, so I brought them as hostages." The attitude he'd shown Finley and Jenna was nowhere to be seen, replaced by that of a sniveling coward—a product of being bossed around constantly by his family.

Rutart glanced at Finley and Jenna. Zola and Merce followed his gaze. Much to her frustration, Finley could only glower back. *I should have obeyed curfew like Leon said.* Had she only returned when she was supposed to, she never would have been captured, and Jenna would never have been injured like this.

"Sorry, Finley," Jenna managed through the pain. "This only happened because I kept you out late."

"I'm more worried about your leg. Are you okay?"

"This is nothing."

Jenna's grimace told another story. Finley realized now how careless she had been. She regretted antagonizing Rutart.

Merce stormed over to the two, having overheard their exchange. "You've been bellyaching a lot over a minor injury." She slammed her foot against Finley's head. "Looking at you girls pisses me off. You're not even true aristocrats—you're living off the scraps that we left for you!"

She dug her heel into Finley's head, venting her frustration at their present circumstances. "*We're* the ones from true noble blood! So why is it you continue to be viewed as high-ranking members of society while we're treated like common rabble?! I've been forced to wear this ridiculous clothing and go out with a man I don't even like just so I can scrape by! All because of you! Mark

my words, you'll pay for all my suffering."

"Th-that hurts!" Finley cried.

Merce lifted her foot. Then she brought it down, stomping Finley's head over and over again. The more she did it, the more rage Finley could feel boiling up from within her. *No, you mark my words, she thought. I won't forget this, and I will have my revenge, no matter what it takes.* Far from trembling in fear, Finley nursed her anger and conviction.

Suddenly, she felt a different body cover her own.

"Jen?!" Finley gasped.

Jenna had draped her body over Finley's to protect her younger sister. The display infuriated Merce, who slammed her foot against Jenna instead.

"Showing off how beautiful your sisterly bond is? Neither one of you hold any value at all! I can already foresee Leon abandoning you. I'll torment you to death, right here, right now!"

Finley genuinely shared that opinion. She and Jenna constantly squabbled with Leon, and he was always extremely cold to them. If it were Colin in danger, Leon would rush to his aid without question, but she doubted he would do the same for her and Jenna.

That big dummy might really abandon me. Dammit. I guess I should have brownnosed some more. Maybe then I could save Jen... Finley's thoughts went to Jenna, who shielded her from Merce's wrath.

Zola watched the torture unfold with a mocking smile. "Merce, I don't mind you roughing them up, but don't kill them. Worthless or not, we might find some use for them. Understood?"

Merce took gasping breaths, having exhausted herself. Her lips curled in a sadistic grin. "You have a point, Mother. But as long as I don't kill them, I can beat them to my heart's content. Isn't that right?" She barely finished her sentence before jamming her foot into Jenna's stomach.

"Hngh!" Jenna groaned in agony.

"J-Jen?!"

Rutart began clapping. “An excellent show.” He wore an equally despicable smile.

Finley seethed with barely restrained anger. *I swear if it's the last thing I do, I'll show each and every one of you what the words “living hell” actually mean.*

Reports poured into the strategy room about the subjugation or neutralization of our enemies' hideouts. Knights filed in one after another to deliver news before leaving, only for the cycle to repeat mere moments later. Yet far from the grim resolve one might expect the knights to express, every one of them seemed pleased to bring us these good tidings.

“All radical elements in the northern part of the capital have been captured! Einhorn is moving to the east area next and dropping off the troops there!”

“The airbike squadron captured a group trying to flee! They have already conducted an investigation, during which the criminals confessed to having ties to Rachel.”

“Good news has come in from the western area! Our men successfully captured a group of former aristocrats!”

With each report, another point on the map indicating our enemy's location disappeared, one after the other.

Everyone's eyes rested on me.

“All right,” I said, “then where should we target next?”

Which location would be the most efficient?

Julius, who stood at my side, pointed at the map. “There's an old tower located here. It would prove rather troublesome for us if they barricaded themselves in here. We should strike before the enemy masses there.”

“Oh, that place? I've seen it a couple of times.”

I hadn't given it much thought. It was an old, decrepit wreck.

“Prior to the capital's expansion, lookouts were stationed there, but now it's used as a warehouse,” Julius explained. “Even the interior is made for battle. It

will prove a nasty stronghold to contend with, should it come to that.”

“In that case, we can’t send in Armors. Guess we should have Greg and his men go in.”

Julius was more knowledgeable than me about the capital and its history, so I treated him like an adviser and based my next move around his advice.

“I ordered Greg to the next location, but he has requested more ammunition,” Luxion said. “I will have him take this route to resupply, although it is not the shortest one.” He highlighted the route on the map, showing us how Greg and his squadron would rendezvous with the resupply unit before he made for the tower.

Seeing no reason to disagree, I nodded. “Then Jilk and his guys ought to do the same.”

“Let us send Einhorn.”

Luxion and I finalized our decisions while Miss Mylene watched, her hands clenched into fists. We’d experienced a flood of good news, downgrading the situation from the serious emergency it once had been. This had given her cause to smile more, but her anxiety persisted.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Nothing. I was awed by how incredible your Lost Item is. It makes sense to me now how you accomplished your feats in the Alzer Republic. My feelings go beyond simple awe, in fact...I find it almost terrifying.” She gave a strained smile. She really did look afraid of Luxion.

I understood why she might view him as a threat, given how capable he had proven himself. Anyone would be frightened in the face of that.

“It’s all right, Miss Mylene.”

“Hm?”

“Luxion may be scary, but he obeys my orders. I would never let him do anything to harm you.” I grinned at her.

“Oh, Marquess...no, Leon...” Relief washed over her, her cheeks turning red.

Beside me, Julius was sneering. “Leon, if you want to hit on my mother like that, could you at least not do it in front of me?”

“I’m not hitting on her. I was reassuring her.”

“Sure. I wonder if it looked that way to everyone else in the room.”

At his prompting, I looked around. Everyone else present avoided my eyes, apparently doubting that my motivations were pure. Meanwhile, Minister Bernard was more shocked to see Miss Mylene blushing.

“I have only ever seen her make that face with you, Marquess Bartfort.”

“Now that’s a compliment!”



Sensing I was getting ahead of myself, Luxion chastised me. “I would advise you to consider the time and place in which you express your joy. Angelica is present.”

“Aw, crap.”

I flinched and slowly turned my gaze to Angie. If she saw all that, she’d probably grab me by the hair and drag me again—figuratively and literally. By looking at her I could gauge what kind of punishment to prepare myself for, but to my relief she was locked in a serious conversation with Miss Deirdre and Miss Clarice and seemingly hadn’t heard a single word of my exchange with Miss Mylene.

“Phew, I lucked out.”

Julius shook his head. “You are something else. In more pleasant news... At the rate we’re going, it seems the riots will soon be at an end.”

I turned my attention back to the map. “Have you found Jenna and Finley yet?”

Finley was nowhere to be found when we left the academy to take refuge in the palace. The other female students claimed Jenna had gone into town to have fun and that, even after curfew had passed, she still hadn’t returned. Today was the worst day she could have picked to break curfew. That girl had the most rotten luck.

“I am searching for them as we speak,” said Luxion.

“Well, get a move on!”

I would feel terrible if either one of them died in all this chaos, and my family would be devastated.

Angie stood by the window in the strategy room. As she gazed out at the capital, she thought to herself, *These riots were so ill conceived that they hardly seem worth the effort.*

The former aristocrats who had hatched this would-be revolt had been reckless and shortsighted. It was obvious to her that the government was

perfectly capable of putting down these organizations without Leon's intervention. She had bigger issues on her mind.

Deirdre came over to her and whispered, "My elder sister captured the men from Rachel. They seem deeply resentful of the marquess. Apparently the 'Scumbag Knight' has been recognized as an enemy of the state in the Holy Kingdom. We've also recovered proof that they had a hand behind the scenes in orchestrating this current mess in the capital. Make sure to communicate all of this to the marquess."

"My people captured a group who call themselves the 'Ladies of the Forest,'" said Clarice. "They seem to have bad blood with Leon as well. We can hand them over to you if you would like."

Rather than relay the information coming in through their houses directly to the palace, they chose to entrust that information and the decision of what to do with it to Angie. Angie wasn't pleased to be treated as their go-between.

"You should tell all of this to the palace authorities, not me," she warned them. Her voice was steady, as though she was offering a sensible rebuttal.

The two women traded looks before smiling faintly, as if to say, *Please, who do you think you're kidding?* They saw straight through Angie's deception.

Clarice snuck a brief glance at her father. "There's no sense trying to fool us, Angelica. The dukedom is refusing to offer their army's aid because they've already turned their backs on the royal family, yes?" Her voice was hushed, quiet enough that no one but them could hear.

Angie pinned her with a glare. "That's not a conversation we ought to have here."

Her complaints didn't dissuade Deirdre. "It's obvious who the victor will be. Take a good look at the marquess. He is commanding the kingdom's troops with frightening precision, is he not?"

Leon was indeed taking the helm, even though he seemed as disinterested in this mission as he did about everything. More pressing was what would come of this situation. Deirdre was right—Leon was *too* precise in his command, to the awe and terror of those around him. And the information of his current

successes arrived in real time.

Even Angie was shocked at how easily they could follow outside events from within the strategy room like this. The army spent a significant amount of money to obtain reliable information as soon as possible. They knew the value in having that intel early. Yet for all their efforts and considerable budget, it was still impossible to have accurate information immediately. Luxion—and by extension, Leon—had made the impossible possible. Everyone in the room was forced to admit his dependability in this regard...although many found him fearsome because of it.

Deirdre leaned in and whispered in Angie's ear. "Don't worry, Angelica. Even if it does come to battle, there is no way we will lose."

Leon had no trouble taking control of the situation, even though the capital was far from his home territory.

Clarice added, "It's eventually going to come to war, whether we like it or not. The royal family can't leave things the way they are right now, and they know it. The marquess strikes fear into their hearts because they know he could put them down at any time and take up their mantle."

The royal family's airship had once been Holfort Kingdom's trump card, but it was lost during the battle against the former Principality of Fanoss. Leon and his Lost Item had become a real threat to the royal family in its absence. Mylene's open display of fear came from perceiving Luxion as a genuine liability. Angie was exasperated with Leon for not realizing that.

Fool, she thought. Take things seriously if you like, but don't show them every card in your hand. Ever since he unveiled Luxion's true form in the Alzer Republic, Angie felt Leon had grown a little too complacent. *A little late now to ask him to exercise prudence, I suppose, but I wish he would at least consult me beforehand...*

As she gazed at Leon, so too did Clarice and Deirdre. Their expressions hardened.

Deirdre peeled her gaze away. "Well, if there's any concern, it would be Her Majesty."

“He sure seems to be on awfully good terms with her,” Clarice remarked, fixing Leon with a cold stare.

They watched as Leon tried to assuage Mylene’s fears. It was clear as day to all three girls that he was flirting with her, and none of them liked it, Angie least of all.

Angie closed her eyes. “Leon’s loyalty to her *is* troubling,” she admitted bitterly.

Instead of recklessly making a move on Her Majesty, he could stand to use that energy thinking about his future. I’ll have to lecture him later.

It was difficult not to be upset by how warmly Leon comforted the queen, but the words rolled off Leon’s tongue so smoothly that she assumed he wasn’t being serious about them. Angie had grown to understand Leon’s messy personality over time.

“I almost want to praise him for having the audacity to flirt in this situation,” Deirdre said sarcastically. “Mostly because his audacity is the *only* thing worth praising at the moment.”

Clarice frowned and placed a hand on her hip. “This confirms it. Our only real concern is the queen.”

Angie tore her eyes away from Leon to stare solemnly at the two women before her. *The problem will be what happens after we get to the bottom of this current situation.* Her anxiety about the future weighed heavy in the pit of her stomach, but she had little time to focus on it—the whole atmosphere in the room shifted abruptly. Leon was calm until he erupted in anger and attracted everyone’s attention.

“Luxion, try running that by me again.” His voice was quiet, but the rage seeped through. He stared straight at his robot companion.

“Your sisters have been taken as hostages. The culprits are remnants of the Ladies of the Forest—Zola and her children, Rutart and Merce.”

“I’m going,” Leon insisted, willing to cast off his duty as commander-in-chief.

Uproar broke out, but from the look on Leon’s face, Angie already surmised

trying to stop him was a pointless endeavor. The others present weren't aware of his stubbornness, however, and tried anyway.

"Marquess, you must stay here! If you were to leave, it would be chaos!"

"My duty here is already done and you know it. All that's left is cleanup," Leon insisted.

"Yes, but that cleanup also requires your orders..."

"I'll give orders when I return. Or if that won't suffice, I'll give them while I'm out."

People swarmed around Leon, all of them trying to persuade him against his determined course.

Angie sighed gently and stepped forward. "Let him go."

Everyone, Leon included, froze to look at her.

She put a hand on her hip and said, "If you're going to be selfish and do what you want, then you'd better take responsibility for your actions."

"Angie..." He stared at her in disbelief, as if he expected her to be one of the many hurdles in his path.

Angie gave him a big smile. "Hurry up and go do your thing so you can come back here."

"I'll be back before you know it," he promised before darting out of the room with Luxion in tow.

Once he was gone, Mylene approached Angie. "You seem to place a great amount of trust in him, but this...you made the wrong call."

"I agree with you, Your Majesty, but Leon has a history with these people. He's going out there to save his family."

Mylene sighed in frustration and turned to gaze at the door Leon had disappeared through. "I had everything about him all wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought him strong and adaptable in any situation, but at his core, he's rather clumsy at handling things." Mylene spoke with a sad smile on her face.

“Poor boy. Angie, you need to be there for him and support him.” Having said her piece, she stepped away.

Poor boy? Angie found that comment a bit strange herself, but she could appreciate why Mylene might think that of Leon. *I guess it’s true, in a way. This isn’t the situation Leon desired at all.*

As soon as I left the strategy room, I found Prince Jake and Oscar loitering in the hallway for reasons unknown. Prince Jake had Eri with him. All of them seemed to be waiting for me.

Oscar approached the moment he spotted me. “Marquess! Have you still not located Miss Finley?!”

“Cool it. I’m headed out to save her now.”

The way he fussed over her made me feel conflicted. It wasn’t that I wanted to meddle in my sister’s love life, but this guy was supposed to be one of the game’s love interests. I knew it was selfish of me, but if possible, I’d rather he hook up with Mia.

“Take me along as well!” Oscar demanded.

“No. You stay put.”

“B-but...”

Seeing how eager he was to rush to her aid, I asked him frankly, “Tell me, how do you feel about Finley? I mean, if you’re that eager to go out of your way to save her, I can already guess you like her.”

Oscar gave a strained smile. “I’m not quite sure myself. I know I find her pleasant, that’s for certain. I suppose I see her as a caring older sister.”

“Older sister?! Finley?!” I gaped.

“Bartfort, I’m going too,” Prince Jake interrupted.

“Huh?”

“I’m more capable than my older brother. I’ll show you how much use I can be.” His bravado was undercut by how his gaze wandered to the girl standing

behind him. He was at that age where boys liked to show off to the girls they liked, so not surprising.

If it wasn't clear before that these two are brothers, it sure is now. They both say stuff that makes me want to scream, "Are you outta your freakin' mind?!"

"Why do you think I'd go out of my way to bring a prince along? It should be a given that you're staying put. Go assist Julius."

Indignant, Prince Jake stammered, "H-how dare... You do know that I am—"

"You're in the way, Your Highness," Oscar interrupted, physically shoving him aside.

"Oscaaaaar?! I am a prince! And you're supposed to be my foster brother, remember?!" Prince Jake shouted at him from where he'd tumbled down on the floor.

Oscar ignored him. His eyes were fixed on mine. "Please, I beg of you! Permit me to go with you. I will not impede you. Please!" He bowed his head low.

"I'm wasting valuable time here. Fine, come, but if you get in my way I will kick you to the curb. Literally."

His face instantly lit up at my approval. Jake's face fell.

"Prince Jake, we should keep a low profile here at the palace," Eri suggested, trying to placate him.

"You have some nerve, Bartfort..." he hissed under his breath.

Prince Jake seemed to resent me for my decision, but I'd be the one in hot water if I agreed to take him with me. Both he and Julius were real thorns in my side.

Guess that's Roland's blood running through their veins, huh?

"Jen, open your eyes!"

Back at the Ladies of the Forest's hideout, Jenna was covered in scratches and bruises after withstanding Merce's abuse. She'd long lost consciousness, and her breathing had grown shallow.

Tears streaked down Finley's cheeks. Jenna's injuries came from shielding Finley with her body.

Merce cackled, a broken stick held in her hand. She had beaten Jenna until it snapped into two pieces. She tossed the now-useless branch aside. "What's the matter? You need to scream for me some more, otherwise it won't be any fun!" she jeered.

Rutart was right next to her, joining in and stomping Jenna. They were venting their dissatisfaction with their current lot in life by using Jenna as their punching bag—or kicking bag, in this case.

"She'll die if we keep this up," he observed, "But who cares as long as one of them survives, right?"

The two siblings looked emotionally numb, as if even they didn't fully realize what they were doing. Perhaps they didn't care.

Their mother, Zola, watched absently from a nearby chair. Her thoughts were preoccupied with fantasies of revenge. "That sounds agreeable to me. Showing Balcus the body of his dead daughter should serve as a wake-up call for him. He'll learn the hard way that he should have never defied me."

Exhausted from doling out abuse, Merce plopped down bodily on a wooden box. "If our plan succeeds, we'll be proper aristocrats once again. This time, we'll have you Bartforts toiling away like slaves for us. You'll live a miserable existence under our thumb."

Zola and her brood's faces glowed with triumphant grins.

They're monsters. Finley's mind wandered back to her childhood. *Thinking back, they've always been terrible people.*

Zola and her children rarely showed their faces at the Bartfort family's estate, but on this particular day she had returned to batter Balcus with complaints. The door to the parlor had been left cracked open so Finley could glimpse her parents through it; Balcus and Luce stood still as Zola hurled verbal abuse at the

both of them.

“What is the meaning of this? Why has my allowance been reduced?! This is in violation of our contract. Completely unacceptable. Can a backwater baron like you not even uphold the most minor of his promises?”

She had come all the way here to protest her reduced funds, but there had been good reason for it.

Sheepishly, Balcus said, “M-my apologies, Zola. We’re trying our best, we swear, but after the disaster this year we simply don’t have the money.”

A natural disaster that struck earlier in the year required funds for them to rebuild the affected areas. As if things couldn’t be worse, their crop yield was lacking. It wasn’t a terrible harvest, but it produced far less profit than usual. With few other options, they sold some of their belongings at the estate to prepare enough funds to send Zola. Finley knew that her mother had relinquished what few outfits and accessories she had in the process. The house looked much emptier than before, and there was less food on the table too.

None of that mattered to Zola.

“So what? What does your suffering have to do with me? If you won’t fulfill your end of the agreement, then I’ve a mind to take matters into my own hands. Shall I rat you out to the palace?”

Balcus bowed his head low. He sensed, perhaps, that nothing good would come of her complaining to her higher-ups. “P-please, anything but that!”

The palace gave women like Zola more favorable treatment than its own regional lords. Were they to hear of this issue, they would agree that Balcus was in the wrong and further charge him a fine for his misconduct. Depending on the severity, they might even confiscate a nobleman’s lands. Balcus had no choice but to grovel.

“Then do whatever you must to prepare the *correct* funds. Honestly, you are such a worthless oaf! Forcing me to come all the way out here to lecture you.” Zola was in a perpetual foul mood, and this time she vented all of her frustrations out on the Bartfort family.

Unable to watch her parents take any further abuse, Finley pulled herself

away. As she fled down the hall, she came across Rutart and Merce, both of whom were dressed in far more luxurious clothes than Finley and her full-blooded siblings.

“How unsightly. I do so detest these countryside bumpkins,” Merce ridiculed the young Finley when she caught sight of her.

Rutart glanced at Finley and shrugged. “I must agree. It’s a miracle they even manage to survive out here in the middle of nowhere.”

Overseeing their needs was Zola’s personal servant, an elven man who said, “Young Mistress, Young Master? If it would please you, I have brought in some snacks for you to enjoy in that room over there.”

The word snacks made Finley’s stomach rumble in response.

The elven man pressed a hand over his mouth to cover his mocking smile as he stared down his nose at her. “Unfortunately, there isn’t any for you.” He turned on his heel and led the other two away.

Finley clutched at her stomach, embarrassed.

“Too bad for you.” Merce snickered.

Rutart didn’t look too excited by the prospect of snacks. “I bet it’s the same old ones we always eat, right? I’m sick of those.”

That got under Finley’s skin. She and her family could barely manage to eat anything at all, so why were Zola and her children enjoying snacks on top of regular meals? Anger swelled up inside her as she tried to ignore the desperate protests of her empty stomach.

That’s right. It’s always bothered me since way back then. They only lived such a luxurious life by leeching all the money we had.

The Bartforts had labored and gone without to furnish Zola and her children with the extravagant lifestyle they enjoyed. Finley had long found it vexing. Things got a little better after Leon rose through the ranks, but the Bartforts were forced to endure a harsh life up until then. All so that they could provide for Zola and her brood.

Why do they blame us for everything when they're at fault? We're the ones with a bone to pick—we're the ones who deserve to hold a grudge.

Her hatred for them grew deeper and more potent.

Suddenly, the door to the hideout burst open with a noisy bang. A boy's booming voice echoed.

"Miss Finleeeeeey!"

It was Oscar, and he wasn't alone. Her brother's more familiar voice soon joined his.

"You're not supposed to yell like that during a sneak attack!" Leon snapped as he came charging in. When he spotted Rutart's weapon, he turned the barrel of his rifle at him. Panicked, Rutart tried to aim his handgun at Leon, but Leon outpaced him.

A bullet tore through Rutart's right arm. He reflexively dropped his gun as blood came gushing out of the wound. He stared at it for a moment, stunned, before he started wailing at the top of his lungs. "Gaaaaah! M-my aaaaarm! Th- there's blood!"

Zola and Merce froze in place, unable to do anything other than watch. Neither of them had processed what was happening yet.

Leon clearly didn't consider them much of a threat. He raced over to Rutart and clocked him with the butt of his gun, knocking him to the floor. Leon stole a glance at Jenna and Finley, frowned, and slammed his foot into Rutart's stomach with all his might. As if not satisfied with that, he straddled the fallen man and set about clobbering him relentlessly with the butt of his gun. There was no drop of mercy in Leon's strikes; this was a flurry of pure, unadulterated madness. Jenna didn't recognize him.

"S-someone...save..."

"Quit your stupid blubbering already! You've dug yourself a deep hole and I'm gonna make sure you suffocate in it. You'll suffer tenfold what you did to them."

Finley watched as Leon continued to whale on Rutart, but she was

interrupted when Oscar rushed to her side. “Miss Finley, are you all right?!”

“Mr. Oscar...” It was a welcome surprise that he’d come here to help rescue her.

Luxion soon appeared to emit a laser from his lens that seared straight through the handcuffs binding Finley. “It seems this matter is finally concluded,” he said.

Finley turned her gaze to Jenna. “Hey, round thing, please...help my sister!”

“I was already planning on it, I assure you. Master would never let me hear the end of it otherwise.” Luxion turned his gaze to Leon, who stood up at last. He was panting for breath.

Rutart’s face was so beaten and bloody it was barely recognizable. He was alive, but he’d lost consciousness.

Leon turned his rifle next toward Zola and Merce. “It’s over. Give it up and come along willingly so the authorities can take you in.”

Merce trembled as she quipped, “Y-you must be a real imbecile. You’re far too late. Our revolution should have already succeeded by now. We’re not the ones who will be arrested; you are!” There was no doubt in her mind that Gabino’s plan would bear fruit.

Zola rushed to agree. “She’s right! You didn’t think you could get away with this ego trip forever, did you, you snot-nosed brat?! A man like you is good for only one thing: obeying and working in service to his betters—us!”

Leon snorted.

His attitude made something in Zola snap. She began to shriek at him. “You’re a have-not with no redeeming qualities! You should have been our slave, but you got in your head that you deserved better. Thanks to you, the entire kingdom was turned on its head! *Everything* that’s gone wrong is your fault! Did you honestly believe you’d get off scot-free after driving this nation into the dirt?!”

She rambled on endlessly until Leon shifted his aim to a wooden box in the room and fired. Zola fell silent.

Leon snickered at her. “I was getting sick of all that wailing. Let me see if I get the gist of this... You think you and yours are totally blameless, huh? You think what you did was fair. Treating our family like garbage and looking down on men—all of it. Man... You guys are so stupid.”

Zola clenched her fists. The fabric of her black gloves audibly strained under the pressure. “How dare a man take such an attitude with me!”

“A man, huh? Yeah, I guess right now, men do have the better lot in society. Might suck for you guys, but for me? I gotta say, it’s pretty sweet!”

“Y-you pig-headed scum!”

Leon was acting arrogant on purpose to get a rise out of her. Once he did, the smile disappeared from his face, replaced by grim determination. “I mean it. You’re too stupid for words. You only landed yourself where you are because of your actions—anyone can see that. You think you’re the victim here? Don’t make me laugh.” His voice shifted to emphasize every word of what he said next. “See, being a douchebag has nothing to do with gender. Anyone can be one.”

Deep frowns formed in Zola and Merce’s brows. They glowered at Leon, but their venomous hatred glanced off him without impact.

“Who are you calling a douchebag?! You’re, like, the king of douchebags!” Merce shouted.

“Difference is, I *know* that I’m a douchebag. You guys seem to lack that same level of self-awareness, which makes you way worse than me.” Leon sneered at them.

“Holfort was once a fair kingdom that rightly respected women!” Zola said. “If only you hadn’t—”

“Don’t assume you’ll get respect if you don’t offer it to other people. And anyway, wake up and smell the gender roles. We hate your guts. Have you any idea how badly you’ve treated us over the years? You really wanna stand here and act like you’ve got no culpability?”

Zola cheeks flushed red with anger. “What are you implying?”

“You don’t give a crap about whether what you’ve done is seen as lawful, do you? Take a minute and reflect on what you’ve done. Your actions are cruel and malicious by anyone’s standards, male or female. And while we’re at it, why don’t I clue you in... Y’know that little ‘revolution’ you mentioned? Well, we’ve already suppressed that sad excuse for an uprising.”

The two women had refused to listen to a word Leon had to say up until that point. However, the moment they heard that the revolution had failed, their fervor drained away.

Zola pointed a trembling finger at Leon. “Y-you’re lying.”

“The fact that I’m here right now should be plenty proof that I’m not. We already arrested your higher-ups. Besides, if you guys were skilled enough to pull off a revolution, you’d never be in this situation to begin with. Those Holy Kingdom instigators played a tune for you, and you were all too eager to dance along to it.”

Merce slumped to her knees. “Then what was all of that hard work for?”

All of their effort and suffering had amounted to nothing. Zola and Merce were consumed with despair. Leon watched them coldly; after the torment both women had caused him, he had a bone to pick with them of his own.

“You should’ve tried harder sooner. Anyway, you made my family suffer, so now you have to pay up,” Leon said in a low voice. Threatening tone aside, it seemed he meant to arrest the two, with no plans of beating them to a pulp like he had Rutart.

“What?” Finley blurted, “You’re not going to do anything to them?” Her thirst for revenge wouldn’t be quenched by this alone.

Leon glanced back at Finley. “Uh, well, I can’t exactly put my hands on a woman like that.”

“We can’t let them walk away in handcuffs just like that, not after what they did to Jen! No way! An eye for an eye, blood for spilled blood! Gender’s got nothing to do with it!”

“F-Finley...? Calm down, okay?”

She was heated. Her breathing came in hard, aggressive bursts.

“Miss Finley, you shouldn’t push yourself anymore,” Oscar said.

When Finley turned her face toward him, she looked like the devil incarnate. “I *can’t* sit back quietly after what happened to Jen! You call yourself a man?!”

“I-I’m sorry.”

Finley tore her gaze away and stomped toward Merce who was still slumped on the ground. She seized a handful of the girl’s hair and slammed her face against the floor. “I’ll do it, then! I’ll avenge Jen!”



“St-stop...! Not my face!” Merce cried, desperately flailing to defend herself.

Finley bashed her face into the ground over and over. Blood spurted out of Merce’s nose, but Finley kept going without uttering a single word. She showed no hint of mercy as she took revenge for her sister.

“I’ll mess that pretty little face of yours up for good!”

Even Leon couldn’t stand by idly while this took place. “Finley, calm down! Please, I’m begging you!”

Finley released Merce when she stopped moving altogether. Ignoring her brother’s attempts to talk her down, her sights set on Zola. Finley’s clothes and face were caked in Merce’s blood. Terrified, Zola edged away from her.

“Eek!”

“Your face’ll look like a bludgeoned potato by the time I’m through with it!”

Finley charged at Zola with demonic passion. A flying kick feinted into a joint-locking technique intent on tormenting the older woman. Once Finley saw foam oozing out of Zola’s mouth, she began to cackle.

Luxion secretly thought she was *exactly* like Leon.

For his part, Leon had tried to talk his sister into stopping, but he hadn’t lifted a finger to make her. “Finley, enough!”

“Screw you! You’ll only take it easy on them because they’re women!” she shouted back at him. “A woman’s enemy are other women! And these women are *my* enemies!” Finley was so worked up that she didn’t bother to be polite with her older brother. She was too busy ruthlessly pounding Zola’s face in. Much as Leon had done to Rutart, she had straddled Zola and was pummeling her, her face eerily expressionless the whole time.

Leon and Oscar were both disturbed by her behavior.

“You truly are related by blood. I shouldn’t be surprised,” said Luxion. He turned his focus elsewhere.

Oscar cradled Jenna in his arms. When she finally came to and saw him, she

had no idea who he was. They had never met before. Regardless, it filled her with joy to be in the arms of a beautiful man. “Wow, what a hunk. Like, am I dreaming or what?” With her injuries, it was incredible she had the strength to say such things.

Oscar was taken aback. “Um, actually, my name is Oscar Fia Hogan.”

His earnest answer left Jenna spellbound. Unfortunately, the effect was somewhat dampened when she remembered how badly injured she was. “Oh, how embarrassing it is to have you see me in such a state, Lord Oscar!”

Luxion was impressed by how tough she was—bemoaning her injuries for how they made her look, not for how painful they were.

“I heard you sustained those injuries protecting Miss Finley,” Oscar said. “There is no need to be embarrassed. What you did was laudable.”

“Oh, Lord Oscar! Um, I realize this may be inconsiderate of me to ask...but are you dating anyone? Or are you engaged?”

“Huh? Um, well, I...” He paused to glance at Finley, who was still beating Zola senseless. “No, I’m not.”

“Has any girl caught your eye?!”

“N-no, not especially.”

Whatever interest he had in Finley had apparently vanished after watching her go berserk.

A gleam appeared in Jenna’s eye. She resembled a starved predator who had locked on to its prey after a long famine. The gleam in her eye faded almost immediately as she readied her persona. “Oh, Lord Oscar, I...I’m afraid I suddenly feel very dizzy.” She threw her arms around him.

A flustered Oscar gently held her in his arms. “Are you all right?!”

Luxion observed the two. He reflected that what Finley had said earlier seemed to be fairly accurate. “Ah. A woman truly has no greater enemy than other women.”

Chapter 9:

The Fate of Zola and Her Brood

FINLEY'S SHOULDERS SHOOK with each gasping breath she took. Her rampage had thoroughly exhausted her, and now she was covered in even more blood. I'd never been terrified by my little sister before, but now? She practically thirsted for bloodshed, like some kind of battle-fueled berserker. Zola and Merce lay collapsed on the floor, punctured with hideous wounds.

"Little sisters are scary," I muttered.

"Your sister has the makings of an impressive warrior in her," said Luxion. "However, she is bound to be more unruly from now on."

"More unruly? Can you get much more unruly than this?"

"Let us save this discussion for another time. More importantly..." Luxion's eye focused on Zola. Rutart had regained consciousness and was crawling over to her.

"M-Mother..."

Was he trying to help his mother? Even monsters like these had some feelings, it turned out. I was only keeping tabs on these three until the troops arrived to apprehend them.

"It's faint, but I sense a Demonic Suit..." Luxion's voice started low, but seconds later, it boomed. "Master, Zola has a Demonic Suit fragment on her!"

"What?! Everyone, fall back! Oscar, you protect my sisters!"

I grabbed Finley and shoved her back, lifting my rifle to take aim at Zola. I could make out something in her hand. Its edge was sharp, like a piece of shattered glass—when Rutart got close, she stabbed it into his neck.

Rutart gaped at her. "Mother... Wh-why?!"

Zola glanced at me and cackled triumphantly. "You let your guard down!" Her eyes moved back to Rutart. "My son, you were a worthless waste of space, but

at least you can be of use to your mother before you die. I'll make a run for it while you fight them."

Zola painstakingly pulled herself up to her feet. While her son suffered in agony from the shard she'd jabbed into him, her thoughts were focused entirely on her own escape.

Merce rose as well. She pressed her hand over her face, glaring at me from the crack between her fingers. "I'll kill you. I swear, I'll come back at some point and murder the lot of you!" She was going to make a break for it like her mother.

Rutart stretched a hand out after her, grabbing her by the ankle. "Help me... Merce..."

Merce kicked him. "Let go of me, you idiot!"

Both women dashed for the exit, abandoning Rutart. As he watched them leave, he broke into maniacal laughter. Numerous lifelike eyes manifested on his back. The Demonic Suit began to consume him, elongating his legs and arms into sharp points, while an enormous mouth split through his stomach. He was unable to maintain his human form at all once the corruption began. In seconds, he had become a monster.

"Rutart..." I started to say before unloading all of my bullets into him. Once my magazine was empty, I quickly reloaded.

Rutart paid me no attention at all. His entire body faced the direction of his fleeing family. When they realized his focus was on them, they collapsed to the floor in fear.

"D-don't come any closer!"

"Go that way! The enemy is over there!"

Rutart's neck began to extend. An ominous smile spread across his lips. "You look...delicious." His entire body was now grossly enlarged. He lunged at his family. While he dealt with them, I turned to my sisters and Oscar.

"We're getting the heck out of here!" I told them, forcing all three to follow me. We scrambled for the stairs to escape the basement. Female cries echoed

behind us, along with some other gruesome sounds I'd rather not have heard at all.

"What the heck is that creature?!" Finley shouted.

Oscar princess-carried Jenna in his arms as he ran behind me. "I certainly don't have any idea!"

"Hurry up, you guys!" Jenna said, even as she took the opportunity to cling closer to Oscar.

We made it to the top floor before hurling ourselves out of the building. Light had begun to color the sky outside; night was giving way to dawn.

"Luxion, what about Rutart?!" I demanded.

Luxion's red lens gleamed. "He's out from the underground." He barely finished talking before the building behind us crumbled to dust, and Rutart's monstrous form emerged. No trace remained of the man he once was. "Rutart" now referred to a lump of flesh with a mouth and five tentacles protruding from his body. He licked his lips when he saw us.

I shuddered. "Oscar, take those two with you! Get out of here!"

"R-right!" He cradled Jenna in his arms. With Finley close at his side, the three of them ran for safety.

Rutart's attention focused on me. His monstrous lips cracked open—I imagined his voice rasping, "It's mine. Your status, your wealth, your power...all of it." Then he began his approach.

"This must be a manifestation of his jealousy toward you, Master," Luxion supplied, by way of explanation. "He thought himself entitled to your noble status, all of your assets, and my power as well. How truly incorrigible."

"You said it."

I dodged the incoming attacks from Rutart's tentacles while firing my rifle at him. Each hit caused his skin to burst open. When I blew off one of his tentacles, he thrashed about. He had grown over four meters in size by this point, so his rampage decimated the nearby buildings. Debris and dust scattered everywhere.

“I empathize with you to a certain degree, so I’ll make this quick,” I said as I took aim with my rifle again. Rutart threw himself into the air, intending to crush and then consume me. I dodged out of the way at once.

Rutart shrieked, “It’s all mine! Everything you have is mine! Everything! Even those three chicks!”

I fired at him, pissed at the crap he was spewing—particularly that last part. I didn’t unleash one round on him but the entire magazine. Each bullet lanced off another chunk of his body until most of it was gone entirely.

“Gaaaaah!” He writhed in pain, wailing. Black liquid gushed from his body. Soon enough, his body lay still.

“It’s over,” I said.

“Did you lose your temper because he said he would take Angelica and the other girls away from you?” Luxion asked with disdain.

“Put a sock in it.”

“If it enrages you so to receive such threats, might I advise you to abstain from making advances on Mylene in their presence?”

“I already told you, I only said that stuff to reassure her.”

“Which would not be an issue if you did not regularly flirt with her. But your indiscretions aside, it seems this matter has reached its conclusion.”

“Heeeey!” Greg’s voice boomed from the distance. He was riding on the back of Jilk’s airbike. I also spotted Chris in his Armor and Einhorn in the sky above. Apparently they had all completed their assignments.

Rutart had disappeared completely. The only trace he left behind was the Demonic Suit fragment.

“Where did they even get something like this?” I wondered aloud.

“Our most likely culprit would be the Holy Kingdom of Rachel. But enough about that...” Luxion sent a signal to his main body, which beamed down a laser that completely destroyed the fragment in front of us. “There, that feels much better.”

“You never change, I see.”

I glanced up above us. Luxion’s enormous spaceship blended into the scenery thanks to its cloaking technology. I only noticed it because I knew where to look and could tell there was a barely distinguishable distortion around it. To anyone else, the sky looked perfectly normal.

I rested my rifle on my shoulder. “Looks like these other Demonic Suits aren’t any real threat, save for Hering. Drives home how terrifying the Black Knight was, don’t you think?”

“The size of the fragment also comes into play, but I suspect the user’s battle competency is a major influence,” Luxion theorized.

“So basically, since Rutart was weak to begin with, he stayed puny even after going monster mode with the power of the fragment?”

“Such is the price one pays for trying to wield a power that far surpasses their abilities. That said, it’s a mistake for *any* human to rely upon Demonic Suits at all.”

The price one pays...? Hey, then what price did I pay for getting my hands on Luxion? Or have I not paid it yet? Dwelling on that worry wouldn’t do me any good, I decided. It wasn’t like me to ponder such vague what-ifs in the first place.

“You tricked me, Roland!”

Roland sat upon his throne in the royal audience chamber, one leg crossed over the other. I charged up the steps and seized the collar of his shirt. This whole time I’d thought he was at death’s door, and yet as soon as this whole mess was cleared up, he showed up looking right as rain. He looked like he’d never been poisoned at all!

Roland seemed to be enjoying himself despite how I was manhandling him. “And here I was about to award you with honors for your deeds, but your current behavior verges on blasphemous. Fortunately for you, I am in a good mood today. I will overlook this transgression.”

As he mentioned, an award ceremony was taking place in the palace, which was why other aristocrats and soldiers were present in the audience chamber to receive their due. Like me, they were flabbergasted when Roland strolled in looking the perfect picture of health after his ghastly prior appearance.

The other royal family members were no less shocked. Miss Mylene clapped both hands over her mouth, while Julius and Jake sneered, as if to say, *Yeah, I figured this is how it would turn out.* Both reportedly thought Roland was too stubborn to die. Like a cockroach. (Okay, they probably didn't think of him like that, but I sure as hell did.)

Minister Bernard had a blank look on his face, as if he'd surpassed the point of shock and was completely done with everything.

"You're telling me the whole part about you being close to death after being poisoned was a lie?!" I demanded.

"Fool. It was true that I was poisoned—moreover, it was true that I was in poor health as a result. However, strangely enough, I immediately recovered once the issue was settled. It pained me, of course, knowing how hard you all worked in my absence."

His bald-faced lie just pissed me off even more.

"Be honest...you tricked me," I hissed.

"Allow me to give you a lesson that I advise you to keep close at heart, brat: It's the fault of the gullible for being tricked so easily, not the person doing the deception. Nonetheless, I must grant you some acknowledgment for your devotion. I hereby recognize your accomplishments in expunging radical elements lurking within the capital and for putting an end to Rachel's ill ambitions."

Cold beads of sweat trickled down my back. I had a bad feeling about where this was going. "Hold it right there," I said in a shaky voice.

"I cannot grant such a request, I'm afraid. From this moment forth, I dub thee Duke Bartfort!"

"Wha?!"

I had been so foolish. I was so confident that no further promotions lay in my future. Now, I was an even higher rank than ever before.

Roland knocked my hand away from his collar and stood up from his throne. “Rejoice, brat! The Holy Kingdom of Rachel is beyond enraged that you vanquished their holy knight. The bounty on your head has increased to the equivalent of 10 million dia! Such an amount is unheard of among our neighboring countries. How incredible! You’re infamous!”

Ten million dia was the equivalent of 100 million yen. Apparently Rachel had doubled the price on my head the moment they learned of their schemes’ failure.

“I-I can’t believe it... That much...?” Roland grinned like a fool as he delivered this revelation, stoking the fires of loathing in my stomach to new heights. I took a few tottering steps back.

Roland moved toward me so he could rest a hand on my shoulder. He then leaned in toward my ear and whispered, “Good job cleaning up that annoying mess. How’s it feel to move even further up the ranks, to stand shoulder to shoulder with House Redgrave? I would *love* to hear your thoughts.”

“Feels sickening,” I snapped, glowering at him.

His grin spread even wider. “Hearing you say that has made this entire hideous ordeal worthwhile.”

Everyone else in the room wore conflicted looks as they watched Roland. Meanwhile, I swore revenge. If it was the last thing I ever did, I’d settle the score.

“Roland is my enemy.”

I retreated to an antechamber once the ceremony was finished, where I flung myself into a chair, hunched my back, and threaded my fingers. I sat there, plotting what ways I might exact my revenge.

Livia’s smile was troubled. “Mr. Leon, I’m afraid you’re probably the only person who has the nerve to call His Majesty an enemy.”

“Trust me, there’s a lot of people who hate his guts. They’re all talking trash behind his back.”

That rat bastard had pushed off all the troublesome work on me while he enjoyed a breezy moment of respite. When everyone else had learned the truth, they had bitter looks on their faces. Miss Mylene’s poker face never faltered, but her eyes were arctic cold as she glared daggers at Roland. Her Majesty was perfect in every way, save for her one glaring flaw—her husband.

Noelle was sitting in a nearby chair, turned backward with her hugging the backrest. She giggled at my contemptuous expression. “Maybe you don’t wanna hear this, but seeing how you act around the king and get away with it proves how valuable you are to the kingdom.”

“Yeah, and thanks to that, I’m a duke now. I’m equal in rank to Angie’s family. Where did I go so wrong in life to end up a *duke*?” I absently gazed out the window.

Noelle shrugged. “Is it really that awful to move up in the ranks? You’ve already climbed pretty high. Can’t be that much different, can it?”

“There’s a huge difference between being a duke and being a marquess!” I barked back, before pausing to second guess myself. “Uh. I mean, I’m sure there is. Right?”

Angie was standing by the wall with her arms folded over her chest. When I looked to her for help, she explained, “Indeed, it’s not a negligible difference. Of the regional lords in Holfort Kingdom, only three are ducal houses. One is the Redgraves, my house, and the other is House Fanoss, formerly considered the royal family of the Principality. And now, the Bartforts join their ranks. Allow me to restate this for emphasis: You are now one of only three ducal houses.”

The only position higher than duke was an archduke, which was essentially like the king of his own nation. No one in Holfort Kingdom presently held that title. My latest title was only bestowed upon an extreme minority within the realm.

I cradled my head in my hands. “This is too cruel. I worked so hard, and he turns around and forces even greater responsibility on me? He’s a demon.”

Angie's lips pulled taut. "Arguably, you were promoted because you did so much work. Speaking of which, you went way over the top. What's the point of showing off Luxion's abilities like that?"

Everyone's eyes turned to Luxion. With great weariness, he said, "It is your mistake for assuming Master imbues any great forethought into his actions. His folly in this case was going all out after he saw how badly emaciated Roland was—he assumed this was his final deathbed wish."

"Don't tell me you knew Roland was actually fine and just faking it," I shot back.

"No. He was genuinely poisoned."

"Huh?"

While Leon was busy languishing over his new position, Roland retired to his room to enjoy some alcohol.

"Did you see that brat's face, Fred! Gah! Aah! Today's liquor tastes better than ever!"

Fred, the man responsible for concocting the poison used on the king, sipped along with him. Curious, yes? Why would these two men meet so early in the afternoon like this to clink glasses? There was, in fact, a good reason for it.

"I never want to do anything like that ever again!" Fred howled at Roland, in tears. "I seriously doubted your sanity when you told me to whip up that poison and hand it over to that girl." He was following Roland's orders the entire time.

Roland gazed at the amber liquid in his glass, basking in the success of their strategy. "And what an incredible poison it was. I successfully pulled the wool over that brat's eyes and got to luxuriate in bed, thereby avoiding the fallout of this entire mess!"

The king had predicted what would happen early on and used his friend Fred to manipulate the enemy. He drank the poison of his own will so that he could foist the responsibility of this affair on Leon.

"I was on tenterhooks wondering if you'd really recover and make it out

alive!” Fred guzzled down his glass all at once, as though hoping to drown his sorrows. When it was empty, Roland refilled it for him.

“Well, this is just the beginning, and our success here guarantees that we have cleared the first step of our plan. I owe you for that, Fred.”

Fred didn’t look the least bit pleased despite the compliment. “More scheming? You never seem to tire of this nonsense.”

Roland smiled. “This is a scheme to end all schemes, I assure you. Things have grown more troubling here as of late. At the very least, I’ll make sure that brat gets to do even more work for me in the future.”

Whatever machinations he had in store, they revolved around Leon.

Marie strode down one of the academy’s corridors with her head held high. Cleare floated close behind her, while Erica walked at her side.

“Looks like we managed to get through this incident safely,” Marie said.

“Yep,” Cleare agreed. “And as usual, Master got another promotion he didn’t want.”

“He’s such a dummy. He ought to be happy about this. What’s all this fuss about not wanting to be higher rank? I can’t understand what he thinks is so awful about it.”

“Master says he has no idea where you’re coming from either, Rie. You guys are sooo similar. It’s a riot to watch you.”

“Ugh. Pardon me, but it’s not very flattering to hear we’re alike.” Marie frowned.

Erica smiled at their exchange, seeming to enjoy it. Her affection made Marie more than a little uncomfortable. *Ugh, how am I supposed to talk to her? She looks way younger than me but inside, she’s even older than I am.*

They had something in common in that they both came here from a different world, but Erica’s maturity created a gap between them that Marie couldn’t surmount.

Cleare observed both girls, looking as amused as an AI was capable of looking. “Pretty incredible that Rica came here from another world like you did. There are tons of you guys out there, huh? Wonder if there’s some kinda universal rule at play here... You guys gotta let me examine you carefully at some point.”

Marie gave her enthusiastic robot companion a look. “You’re giving the princess a nickname now?”

“That royal hierarchy stuff doesn’t matter to me.”

Erica forced a smile. “Well, when time permits, I suppose you can do your examination.”

“Really?! Yay!”

“Big Bro scolded you for this kinda stuff real recently, or have you forgotten?” Marie shook a finger at her. “If you try anything funny, he might have you completely disassembled this time.”

“I’m going to do a detailed exam! That’s all. Besides, Master’s bark is way worse than his bite.”

Erica watched the two bicker, her interest piqued by the mention of Leon. “What kind of person is the duke?”

The way she tilted her head reminded Marie of her daughter, and her chest panged. *That’s right. She used to do that all the time...*

After a moment’s hesitation, she answered, “Well, I guess he’s nice. Or rather naive? He’s a great older brother as long as he dances to my tune, but once he goes off the deep end there’s no saving him. I’ve dealt with some pretty awful stuff because of him.”

“Yeah, Master’s given Rie a lot of grief. Like, on numerous occasions.”

“Oh, be quiet,” Marie grumbled, irritated at the unwarranted commentary. “Anyway, my brother and I both played this otome game when we were alive, and after we died, we woke up here. Same for you, I guess?”

“Yes, although I only ever played the third installment.”

“The second game was the only one I really played from beginning to end. The first one was so difficult I forced it on my Big Bro to complete. But that dummy

pulled an all-nighter playing it, took a bad tumble down the stairs, and ended up dying. Seriously, what an idiot.” As much as Marie mocked Leon for the foolish way he’d died, her expression was dark as she relayed the details. She regretted the role she had played in his death.

Erica sensed Marie’s true feelings. “You must have adored your older brother.”

“What? Were you even listening? He’s a big dope! Between this world and our last, I just can’t seem to shake him off.”

“But you have always regretted what you did to him, correct? You feel that you created the circumstances which led to his death,” Erica observed.

“W-well, I...”

“From my perspective, you two seem like very close siblings.”

“We’re not related anymore!” Having her close relationship with Leon pointed out left Marie flustered, and with no other means to deal with those emotions, she denied Erica’s assertion outright. Not that her denial actually made any sense when she thought about it. She lapsed into a sulk.

Erica, on the other hand, looked pleased to have confirmed her suspicions. “The way you express your anger hasn’t changed a bit.”

“What’re you talking about?” Marie snapped at her, glaring. She didn’t appreciate the way Erica spoke, as if the two had been acquainted for years.

Erica stopped short while Marie continued a few more paces without noticing. “What I mean...is that I am glad to see you are doing so well, Mother.”

Marie froze, her mind unable to compute the words she was hearing. She spun around. As she scrutinized Erica, she finally realized what had been nagging at the back of her mind since they met. Normally, she might have brushed Erica off with a look of annoyance, but instead she felt hot tears trail down her cheeks.

“Y-you gotta be kidding.”

Erica shook her head, her long, wavy hair dancing with the motion. “You’re the same as I remember. Kind, but the type of girl that easily gets carried away.

I suspected it at first, but I couldn't be sure. It wasn't until I heard you talk about your brother—or rather, my uncle—that I knew it was you.”

The circumstances revolving around Leon's death were too unique for it to be anybody else.

Marie clapped her hand over her mouth, trying to suppress her tears. She couldn't so much as remember her daughter's name anymore, but she saw her in Erica's countenance. “H-how did you...”

How did you know? was the question that sat unspoken on her lips, but her voice stubbornly refused to finish the sentence.



“I had a feeling for a very long time. Word about the Saint and Baron Bartfort—or rather, Duke Bartfort—reached the palace some time ago. The details I uncovered reminded me of you. When we met, I noticed you had the same quirks I recognized in her.”

Marie launched herself at Erica and threw her arms around her. “You should have said so sooner! I-I didn’t...!” She clung to her daughter, devolving into sobs.

Erica tenderly embraced her. “I’m sorry, Mother.” She looked ironically like a parent, comforting her inconsolable child.

Cleare spun around the two, chirping, “Rie looks way more like the kid here!”

Epilogue

I FOUND MYSELF in a pub in the capital, sitting in a private room that had been sectioned off from the main establishment. A certain conspicuous individual sat across from me. Luxion's lens gleamed ominously from where he floated at my side.

"Master, when will you give me permission to commence my attack?" he asked.

"Who said anything about attacking anyone? We're here to have a discussion. I told you that already."

The man on the other side of the table was in a similar argument with his own partner. Brave's singular eye was bloodshot as he stared us down.

"Partner! Stay on guard. They might have slipped poison into your food. I'll test every plate for you before you eat!"

"You're only saying that because you want some of the food for yourself. I'm not a fool."

It was hard to believe, with all the hustle and bustle inside the pub, that riots had raged throughout the capital only a short time ago. The pub was so lively that people barely paid us any attention. Although, with the partitions around our room, they'd have a tough time if they tried; we'd specifically picked this place so we could have some privacy.

"Anyway," I said, "let's be frank with one another, 'kay? Why'd you even think I was suspicious in the first place? You were looking into us from the day of the opening ceremony, right?"

Hering sipped his drink before answering. "No hero named Bartfort ever existed in the game. Tell me, do you know what I mean by that?" The tentative way he asked, as though testing the waters, revealed everything.

"You reincarnated here too, huh?"

His suspicions confirmed, Hering said, "My aim is to protect Mia."

"The protagonist?"

“Do you know what a guardian knight is? Their duty within the Empire is to protect women of high birth or status. I volunteered to be Mia’s.”

“That’s why I found you so freakin’ suspicious. There was no such thing as a guardian knight in the game,” I said.

“The system has a long and storied past.”

“So you picked Mia because she’s the emperor’s illegitimate child?” I guessed.

“You know that much already?”

“I don’t have a clue about this game, my guy. Marie’s the one who knows all this.”

Hering nodded to himself. “The fake Saint.”

I pressed a hand to my forehead. I could already feel the headache coming on.

“Rumors of the two of you have already reached the Empire,” he continued. “There was no hero in the game known as the Scumbag Knight, nor was there ever a fake Saint.”

“I get it. So that’s why you suspected us, huh?” I couldn’t blame him. I would have been wary of him, had our positions been switched. Exasperated by Hering’s extreme caution, I leaned back in my seat. “You should’ve made contact a lot sooner! You just made a nuisance of yourself by getting in my way.”

A disgruntled Brave interjected, “You’re the nuisances! You and that migratory ship, Luxion. He’s a terrible weapon, a remnant of the old humans!”

“I was entrusted with the hope of old humanity,” Luxion corrected him irritably. “If anyone here is ‘terrible,’ would that not apply most aptly to you?”

“You may fall short in battle when compared to a high mobility battleship... but in every other capacity, you’re the most terrible of all, without question! I have fought with others of the same make as you, and I never want to repeat that experience.”

It was pretty incredible. Brave was ridiculously powerful, but he was insistent about not fighting a ship like Luxion if he could help it.

Luxion's lens gleamed. "Allow me to clarify. You assaulted our migratory ships as they fled to outer space? How like new humanity to cowardly target a ship filled with civilians unfit for battle."

"You think you have the moral high ground?!"

Hering and I traded looks and shrugged, exhausted by the antics of our squabbling partners.

"Luxion, enough is enough. We're not getting anywhere because of you."

"Trying to understand anything about them is a pointless endeavor. Master, I request permission to fully eradicate the remnants of new humanity."

"Quit making me repeat myself. I said no."

Hering was busy trying to persuade Brave. "Kurosuke, the conflict between you happened eons ago, right? I want to focus on saving Mia."

"I guess you're right, yes..."

Save Mia?

Come to think of it, Marie had said something before that weighed on me. Mia had always been a healthy, energetic girl, but for some reason her body had grown frail. Whenever she did intense activity, it resulted in painful spasms. All that struck me as far different from what I'd heard of the third game's protagonist.

"So the protagonist—Mia," I corrected myself, "she's got a weak constitution, I guess?"

Hering offered Brave a drink. His eye stayed glued to me the entire time, glaring as he sipped his soda through a straw.

"There was nothing wrong with her up until last year," Hering explained, "but it's gotten to the point where she occasionally has trouble breathing. I had the Empire's most renowned physician examine her, but he couldn't pinpoint the cause."

"So you've got no idea why it's happening?"

"When dosed with mana, her spasms weaken, which indicates that healing

magic has some effect. That's treating the symptom, though, not the cause—and we have no way to deal with that. She's showing no signs of improving at all. If anything...she seems to be gradually getting worse."

"And you let her go through with studying abroad in her condition?"

"Listen, I wanted her to rest too, but I knew there was an important event here awaiting her."

"Event? What event?"

Marie's information matched what Hering had shared—that Mia had suddenly fallen ill the year before. But I never dreamed it'd turn out to be some new disease of unknown origin. The villainous princess was supposed to be sickly all the time, but she'd done the opposite and made a full recovery.

What the heck is going on here?

Hering explained, "There is an awakening event in the middle of the game. There's supposedly some ancient ruins in a dungeon here in the capital, and when Mia touches them, her power awakens."

Uh, an awakening event? Marie never mentioned anything about that.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said.

"Really? It's a pivotal part of the game." He quirked a brow at me, like he couldn't believe the depths of my ignorance.

"I only ever played the first game, okay! And what about you? You mean to tell me you played the game religiously or something?" I stopped short of pointing out that it was weird for a guy like him to play those kinda games. He could say the same thing right back to me. There was no guarantee he'd been a guy in his previous life, anyway.

Hering hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "I watched my younger sister playing it, that's all. She liked gushing to me about what happened in the game, which is how I remember it so well."

"You and your younger sister were close? I can't believe that." Or rather, I simply didn't *want* to believe such a thing was possible since I was cursed with Marie as my sister. From my experience, little sisters were incredibly selfish and

entitled. They were the enemy of big brothers everywhere.

Hering tried to steer the conversation back as I sneered. “At any rate, it is a very important event for Mia. It gave a big boost to her stats in the game, but I want to see if it can help cure her of this sickness.”

“It is equally possible that it won’t,” Luxion interrupted, as if to dash Hering’s hopes. “In a worst-case scenario, it could cause her condition to progress.”

“Hey,” I snapped at him.

Hering dropped his gaze to the table. Judging by the look on his face, he’d already entertained this possibility. “Your partner makes a valid point. I have considered those chances myself. However, the fact remains that I am here on orders to investigate the kingdom—to find any clues that might lead to curing her illness.”

Hering didn’t disclose who had given him these orders, but I guessed it had to be someone of fairly high rank within the Empire. Mia was the emperor’s illegitimate child, after all. The Empire had to consider her pretty valuable if they bothered to assign a guardian knight to her. That part, too, was different from the game.

“Could you cure her?” I asked, giving Luxion a sidelong glance.

Hering’s head jerked up. His hopeful eyes fixated on Luxion, pleading that Luxion might possess the technology needed to help Mia.

“Without examining her, I am unable to say one way or another,” Luxion said. “However, there is no doubt that I stand a better chance of helping her than that useless Demonic Core over there.”

The way he went out of his way to try to compete with Brave was incredibly... human of him.

Spikes rippled across Brave’s body as he exploded with rage. “As if we could ever entrust our precious Mia to you!”

“Are you so eager to abandon the chance to save her? I cannot fathom your illogical thought process, but it further proves how deep your irredeemable cruelty runs.”

I grabbed Luxion to stop him from launching into another verbal squabble. Hering did the same with Brave. The both of us were being put through the wringer by our partners.

“Well, we can save the examination for another time,” I said. “And relax. I have no interest in being enemies with you. I’d prefer to never fight you again.”

Hering scrunched his face. “Nor I with you. Your Armor is straight-up *bizarre*.”
Bizarre? How rude.

“You were stronger than me. I tried all kinds of stuff on you and broke all my weapons in the process, ran out of ammo, and was left panicking by the end.”

“Don’t be absurd. Do you have any idea how much I was sweating with the way you’d come at me again and again with a different weapon each time?”

It was true that one of Arroganz’s key features was the wide variety of weapons it had at its disposal, but given how easily Hering managed to adapt to each one, his counter sounded more like sarcasm to me.

“Your cheat abilities were way worse than mine. I thought I was a goner.”

Hering slammed his fist down on the table. “I’m the one who very nearly lost my life in that battle! Remember that lethal technique you launched on me there at the end? You left Kurosuke in shambles.”

“I unleashed every last bit of power I had on you, and it still looked like I barely left a scratch. I was at my wits’ end. I was sure there was no way I could beat you.”

“I already told you, I was at death’s door! Besides, *I* was trying to hold back.”

“Oh, give it up! You call *that* holding back?! I saw my life flash before my eyes!”

The two of us grew increasingly more heated. A staff member interrupted us by peeking inside the room; Luxion and Brave graciously ducked under the table so she wouldn’t spot them.

“Excuse me, but we would appreciate it if you could keep your voices down a little more,” she said sheepishly.

"I'm sorry."

"We'll be quiet."

As soon as she left, the two of us simultaneously reached for our drinks, trying to cool our heads.

"Let's table this discussion for now. Basically, you both came here because you wanna save Mia, right? No other objectives?" I asked.

They nodded in unison. That was one heck of a close bond between them.

"That's right," said Hering.

"No reason to come back here once Mia is safe," Brave added.

Great. There was no reason for us to battle. That in itself made this a successful meeting.

"Then we've got no issues with each other. I don't mind helping you out with your current objectives either. If there's anything else you need, just let me know."

As I extended the olive branch, I was surprised to see the tension in Hering's shoulders slowly seep away. He eyed me curiously. "Seriously?"

"Yes, why?"

"It's just... Everyone calls you the Scumbag Knight, so I pictured you having a pretty terrible personality." Hering shifted his gaze away, ashamed of his own prejudice. "See, the rumors that reached the Empire spoke of a man who was merciless and cold-blooded."

"You can't trust rumors, man. Although, uh... What did these rumors say specifically?"

Hering pursed his lips, reluctant to share what he'd heard. "Promise you won't get angry? We heard that you made a mockery of your own country's prince during a duel. Knowing what I know now, that can't possibly be true."

This has to be about that mess of a duel between me and the idiot brigade, huh? Hering seems to doubt it's veracity, but uh...yeah. I did that.

"Yeah, that rumor is false," I said.

"I figured it had to be. No way you would ever do that to your own kingdom's prince."

"Uh, no. What I mean is, I made a mockery out of more than just the prince. I ridiculed every love interest from the first game."

"Sorry?" Hering blurted back in disbelief.

"Master publicly shamed Julius and the other heirs of noble houses," Luxion explained. "The five of them were powerless in the face of Arroganz's overwhelming might."

It brought back some pretty fine memories, thinking back on it now. "It sure felt good to teach them a lesson."

"Indeed."

Flustered, Hering frantically tried another tack. "Th-then what about the rumors I heard about the Alzer Republic? Is it true that you picked a fight with one of the Six Great Houses?!"

I shook my head. "No, it's not true."

"I-I figured as much! It would be beyond reproach to pick a fight when you were on a foreign exchange." His shoulders slumped in relief.

"Yeah, I didn't pick a fight. They did. I just finished it. Kinda sorta made an enemy of all of the Great Houses, actually. But while we're on the topic, it's not my fault that their government fell either. That kinda happened by accident when I moved to suppress their ongoing coup d'état."

Hering stared at me. His jaw hung open.

Brave reached out a tiny hand and tugged at Hering's shirt. "Partner, he's worse than the rumors made him seem."

"I cannot allow that remark to go unchallenged," Luxion interrupted in a surprising show of loyalty. "You have no idea how truly terrible my master is. This barely scratches the surface. Those rumors are merely a digest of his diabolical deeds."

"Okay, you. Pipe down," I said. *Looks like I had the wrong idea. So much for loyalty.*

Hering pulled a face. “I didn’t expect you to be *worse* than the rumors made you seem.” He was even more guarded with me than before. I wasn’t sure why.

When I returned to the academy, Marie immediately pounced on me. She had been waiting up for me to get back. “You’re late! It’s way past curfew! Wait, seriously?! Don’t tell me you were out drinking!”

The scent of alcohol doubtless clung to my clothes since my meeting was held in a pub, but personally I had no interest in booze. “I’m not drinking a drop of that stuff ’til I turn twenty.”

“What a stupid answer. It’s already legal here for you to drink at this age.”

“I live by the rules I have made for myself, not the ones society makes for people. Anyway, what do you need?” I was done with her wasting time quibbling with me about nonsense. I hoped she’d spit out her real motive fast.

Tears welled in Marie’s eyes. She clenched her face, and in the most serious voice she could muster, she declared, “Big Brother, to tell the truth...Erica is my daughter!”

I yawned.

“Assuming you have not consumed alcohol, are we to surmise that your memories are jumbled?” Luxion asked. “Did you perchance hit your head, Marie?”

“I’m not drunk, and I didn’t hit my head!” she snapped at him.

I laughed. “That makes your claims sound even crazier. Princess Erica is Miss Mylene’s biological daughter. She has no relation to you. Pretty impudent for you to go around calling her your kid like that.”

Marie jammed her foot into my shin.

“Yowch!” Tears pricked at the edges of my eyes. Damn, that throbbed!

Marie glared at me. “Just what was *that* supposed to mean, huh?”

“Uh, err, it’s just... I meant, it’d be bad for us to have this conversation out here in the open, y’know? I didn’t mean anything else by it. Honestly, ma’am.” I

had no idea why I was being polite and calling her ma'am all of a sudden. I guess her intense violence overwhelmed me and jumbled up some of my own thoughts.

"Oh?" Luxion sounded amused at my predicament. "It sounded to me as if you meant something else."

"Does it ever occur to you that you ought to protect your master?"

Before the two of us could launch into one of our time-honored squabbles, Marie clapped her hands. "Enough. Listen up!"

I reluctantly obeyed and waited for her to continue.

"What I *meant* is that she is my daughter from Japan," Marie said solemnly. "That means Erica is—or rather, was—your niece."

For a solid moment, I stared at her in disbelief. I had heard her mention that she had a daughter before. A kind daughter, one who was her complete opposite. That was who she meant, right?

"Uh, but why's my niece here? Y-you're sure about this?"

"Completely. I already confirmed it myself," she said.

"When'd she die?"

"She said that she lived to the ripe old age of sixty, but why are you asking?"

"Because in this world she's only two years younger than we are."

Did it make any sense for her to reincarnate here and only be two years younger when she had died many decades after the two of us had? It made my mind spin. Marie seemed as confused as I was.

"I don't know all the details, but I can tell you it's definitely her," Marie insisted.

"It seems rather pointless to debate this topic considering the two of you are classmates in this world. That would suggest a lack of temporal constraints when it comes to reincarnating here. Am I mistaken?" Luxion reminded us.

Honestly, we didn't know any more about what it meant to reincarnate here than he or anyone else did. Nor did we have any clue why it happened in the

first place. We woke up one day, and bam, we were here.

“However,” Luxion went on, “if there is some kind of law at play with regard to how people reincarnate here, I am most curious to learn it. Let us investigate this subject more closely.”

I was more concerned about Erica.

“Let me get this straight... My niece is the villainous princess?”

Just what curveballs was life going to throw at me next?

Afterword

HELLO THERE! It's me, Yomu Mishima. I usually have to rack my brain about what to write in this afterword, but this time hasn't been too bad!

First, let's talk about Volume 9. We have finally entered Leon's third year and the third installment of the otome game series. Things never go quite according to plan for Leon and Marie, but once again they join forces to deal with the new problems that face them. Perhaps it sounds biased of me, the creator, to say this, but I think Leon and Marie bounce off each other beautifully. Coming up with dialogue between them is so natural for me, and I love how Luxion interrupts with his own sarcastic jabs.

Speaking of how well Leon and Marie get along, *Marie's Route** demonstrates their close relationship even better. This particular story isn't available as part of the web novel or the published light novel, so it's pretty exclusive! If you do want to check it out, please answer the survey questions and check the box to read *Marie's Route* at the end.

With that out of the way, let's talk about the most exciting news that's coming out recently. *Trapped in a Dating Sim: The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs* is getting an anime adaptation! I never dreamed in a million years that one of my series would get chosen to become an anime. I know this only happened thanks to you readers and your support. So truly, thank you! I may be the creator of the series, but I'm as anxious as the rest of you to see Leon and Luxion moving about on screen!

I am truly fortunate to have such amazing people around me. I'm grateful beyond words for my editor, illustrator, and the mangaka handling the manga adaptation of the series. I know I don't normally mention them at all in my afterword, but without them and all that they do, I doubt this anime adaptation would be happening.

The most precious thing of all is the support I have received from you readers. I consider it a shared achievement with all of you to get this chance for *Trapped in a Dating Sim* to be animated!

Anyway, I'll bore you if I keep rambling on endlessly, so I'll wrap things up here. I hope you will continue to support me in the future.

* *Marie's Route* is a bonus story accessible through a Japanese survey from the publisher and not currently available in English print.



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